UNITED STATES HOLOCAUST MEMORIAL MUSEUM

ועידת התביעות
Claims Conference
Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany

Claims Conference Holocaust Survivor Memoir Collection

Access to the print and/or digital copies of memoirs in this collection is made possible by USHMM on behalf of, and with the support of, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany.

The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum respects the copyright and other intellectual property rights associated with the materials in its collection and makes good faith efforts to determine the copyright status of such materials. The Museum has a good faith belief that the materials in this collection may be made publicly available. The Museum welcomes additional information about copyright status. If you have additional information or concerns about the copyright ownership of materials in this collection, please contact the Museum's Library by phone at 202-479-9717 or by email at reference@ushmm.org.

Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2023 with funding from
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

https://archive.org/details/bib292134

A Chain of Miracles

A Memoir by

Agnes Erdos

Copyright, The Library of Congress
TXU 919-930

This memoir was written by:
Agnes Feher (alias Agnes Erdos)
208 E. 82 St. APT. 9 TEL. 212-879-5612
New-York N.Y. 10028

The story I will tell you happened in 1944. The heroes and heroines of this story are simple people who would have never experienced the drama of life and death outside of the usual human scale and a suffering so deep and so exclusive as to which no measure has ever been given. If the big hurricane that swept through the world at that time wouldn't have uprooted them, swept them away destroying them. Millions of people were engaged in this life and death struggle and one met heroes and heroines everywhere. But I want to tell my story, the story of a young girl whose sky darkened just at the moment when her life began.

I

The apartment was on the second floor. It had seven rooms. My mother's beauty shop occupied the three front rooms. We lived in the back. It was a busy place. The hairdryers buzzing all day, laughter, gaiety, women customers coming and going all day. My mother was a very good hairdresser. She liked her job and she spent the whole day working there. I was an apprentice and later an operator in my mother's shop. I loved the work, the atmosphere and that I could listen to the women talking about what most interested me in life, love.

My father and brother came home at noon and all four of us sat down to have a hearty meal, the big meal of the day. My father was a big eater, loved my mother's cooking. He would talk about his morning in his shop. My father was a tailor. My mother dished out the soup with a big ladle serving my father first. After the meal everybody went back to work and my fourteen year old brother to play. The days went by like this except on Sundays when nobody worked. We went visiting family and later to the movies.

I was seventeen years old. A pretty girl, tall, slender with black hair. I was on the threshold of being a grownup. Sometimes I refused to go with my family to the movies, went with a boy if I had a boyfriend to go with. Many times I hadn't so I stayed home, instead of being seen in the movies with my family. I would play the piano or my accordion and spend the afternoon as best I could. I had many boyfriends already, but I was never in love. I was expecting love to enter my life any minute, and was ready to greet it. But love didn't yet present itself. And I was getting impatient. I was writing in my diary sentimental phrases like "here I am seventeen and my heart is empty.'

I would have liked to be really unhappy – like some heroine in the books I was reading but I wasn't. I laughed, I sang, I was trying on all my dresses reading played music and was waiting.

On a warm fall day in a dentist's waiting room, I met a man 32 years old, tall, sun tanned and who was using some kind of scent. His talk was interesting and he knew how to handle a woman (in this case a girl.). I fell in love with him on our second date after the first kiss. The man was in a forced labor camp which this time yet was not an extermination camp and it was perceived as just a work camp for Jews who were not allowed to bear arms. He came over every evening, playing cards with my mother who liked him very much. In a short time we became engaged. I was insanely happy with the ring

on my finger and was showing it off to my girlfriends who were still in school. (I quit in junior high.) and were tired looking and pale before graduation overworked with study where as I dressed in finest, walked the main street on the arm of my handsome tall fiancee. It is true a war was going on, but I didn't think much about it. It hurt me that as a Jew I can never be equal with the other Hungarians but I felt first Hungarian and then Jewish in spite that I grew up with discrimination. I was young and happy. Yes, it was true a war WAS going on, but my mother produced the good food we ate every day, we still had our servant girl who could be asked to bring me a glass of water, the cinemas were open and my fiancee came every night. I simply did not think of the war. Once for a few days, I had to go to classes to learn about possible air raids and what to do when it comes. There I heard about bombed out houses lethal gas attacks it was scary but I thought that this will not happen in the small town I was living in. One day a pale skinny young man came in to my mother's shop and in a low voice asked for money. He said that he lived in the upper part of the country and there the Jews were closed in a camp surrounded with barbed wire. He escaped. My mother listened to him, gave him money. My mother always gave money to who asked but I could tell from the smile on her face that she believed nothing of the story. But I ran after the boy and asked him if it was really true what he just told my mother or he made it up just to get money. The boy looked at me with a curious smile and said – "I've made it up." Then turned around and quickly left. Now I know he had told the truth, but he wanted to save my innocence of horrors for a

innocence of horrors for a little longer. Days went by fast and I was happy. I had this big warm extended family, uncles, aunts, cousins, grandmothers, a grandfather. They celebrated the fact that I so young already had a man to marry where two of my older cousins and one aunt haven't yet found anyone.

That day started like any other day. Early morning the operators started to arrive in the beauty shop. Maria, an old "maid" of thirty, who was very popular with the customers, Elizabeth Kovacs, daughter of a shoe repair man, that my mother taught, polished instructed until she became an elegant, pretty woman. She also, I thought, knew how to handle men. I used to listen to her stories with rapture. I learned from her the intricacies of relationships with men. She taught me my basic method of dealing with men.

The linoleum was freshly washed, everything polished and gleamed. It felt good to put on the freshly ironed white smock and to wait for customers. And they came. Military wives, wives of merchants, rail road employees, women from the country houses of rich landowners, elected officials. Our beauty shop was in fashion and we were well thought of.

That day I worked all morning, then had dinner – the four of us – as usual – five o'clock. I quit working as usual, went to our living quarters and started dreaming for the evenings when Bandi, my fiancee, would arrive. I opened the doors of my big closet. I gave my whole attention to the big task, selecting the outfit I will wear for Bandi this evening. Finally I choose a navy blue dress which was altered for me from my mothers so I felt it was very grown-up looking. I felt beautiful in this dress. I sit down reading, waiting for Bandi. But the hour when he was to arrive came and went and he didn't show. I wasn't worried. I thought maybe he couldn't get a pass this night. I waited a little longer, then went to a café where I knew I will find lots of young people – among them my friends. I had a good time eating pastry filled with cream, telling my friends about my happiness of being in love and engaged.

Then one of the girls was called to the phone. She had a long conversation. When she put the receiver down she turned to me saying " Agi, I think this interest you too. The unit of your fiancee is being transferred, maybe to the front." (Forced labor units were working behind the lines.) I felt such a fear, panic, I ran home and when I entered the living room there stood Bandi. I clung to him, crying. He said, "Don't cry, my darling, we are only

being transferred to Budapest." I said, "If you go to Budapest, I will go to, and stay there until you are transferred again. I want to see you any chance I can." The next day the unit left and I followed it the same day.

I arrived to Budapest, March 18th, 1944. I went to the home of my future mother in law. I enjoyed the busy colorful streets of the big city, so I went out for a short walk. When Bandi's sister came back from a shopping expedition, she remarked that today she had seen lots of German soldiers on the streets, much more than before and there were many airplanes flying.

Later Bandi called telling me where he was and asking me to come see him. I started out immediately! I saw the German soldiers swarming but I felt no fear or anxiety.

Bandi was on a remote rail road station, in a long train with his comrades. There were other girls, too. We had a good time, laughing singing and card playing. Suddenly, one of the Hungarian soldiers , a guard, entered the wagon, saying, " I have very bad news for you all. Today, the Germans have occupied Hungary. If some of you girls are from out of town, I advise you to travel home immediately."

I had to say goodbye to Bandi, not knowing when and how will I ever see him again. I had to go home. With another girl from the same town as I, we went back to Budapest, quickly packed our bags and out to the Keleti railroad station. The station was thronged- big crowds of people jostling. On one of the entrances a policeman was asking for I.D.

I was holding on tight to Edith's hand, didn't want to get separated from her. I felt fear but I didn't know what I was afraid of. After all, I hadn't done anything bad. Finally, we were seated on the train. Sitting there, we were talking quietly among us, Edith, her father and me. Edith and her father said, "Us Jews, we are now in great trouble." But I couldn't believe it. We arrived to Miskolc - to home- at dawn. When I saw my mother 's frightened, disturbed face – not the same sweet smile as always, then I knew that something terrible is coming and that something ended now forever. Then the long agonizing days started.

We didn't know we were condemned to death. We didn't know we were dying. Edith came to have her hair done and told me that she will marry her fiancee shortly. She wants to be happy. Who knows what's coming. My mother told me then that I should

write Bandi asking him to come and we should have our wedding. I didn't feel ready for marriage. I wanted to explain to my mother how I felt but then I thought maybe later when I will be ready it will be too late.

Bandi answered my letter saying yes – he wants to get married. I started to feel good about the wedding, to become a woman, to experience sex that I heard so much about but had no idea what it was like. In the meantime, the Germans staged a big march of soldiers down the main street. Hungarians cheered them with great enthusiasm. Never before had an occupied people been so happy and loving toward their occupiers. The people wanted circus. And as we know, the Germans gave them circus.

I was standing on the sidewalk among the other Hungarians, waving and smiling at the handsome soldiers parading in their grey uniforms. I was 18, the band was playing, the soldiers were smiling. I clapped my hands. I didn't know how should I have known that

these shining boots – now marching, will trample my innocent heart and all that was beautiful and dear in my life – these boys – with their pink baby faces will take away from me.

On the second day of April, my wedding took place. It was a bright sunny day and once more, for the last time, the family assembled. My mother made a big dinner. Everybody was there, my aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins. I felt as if in a dream. This can't be my wedding. I am still a child – I felt.

And when everything was over, all the guests departed. My parents kissed and left me alone in the apartment with Bandi who now was my husband.

The apartment seemed very quiet. This was the first time there were only two people there. I lost my virginity in my parent's double bed. Bandi had left at dawn – going back to Budapest to join his unit. His pass was for two days only.

When the family came back in the morning, I was laughing and joking telling everybody that I had become a woman.

Then orders started to come for the Jews. Jews were no longer allowed to keep servants. The girl we had with us departed crying. My mother was now cooking and cleaning and working in the beauty shop. I was so busy writing letters to my husband, daydreaming. I never offered to help and my mother never asked. She found it totally natural that ~~maybe~~ while she ~~did all this work~~, I was sitting in the cool living room writing letters.

The mood among the Jews was panicky. Rumor said that it would be good to go to the country, find work on some farm. But only a very few were able to do this, and only through friends. I don't know how to convey the feelings of these days. When we all realized that the very earth under us is moving. My brother, Gyuri, went to work on a near by farm. He was 15. He went uncomplaining, bravely ready to work. In his suitcase was his first pair of long pants (boys in Hungary wore short pants until 15). And his first paintings, a portrait of my grandfather. The portrait was very good. There was my grandfather with his innocent smile, white handlebar moustache – black hat. He was 82. Gyuri was very proud of this painting. He said his goodbyes cheerfully and went. We thought for the time being he was safe.

The air raids started. Everybody had to prepare a small emergency package. My grandfather who was living with us now, after the sudden death of my grandmother, made his package methodically and with gusto.

It was strange to be awakened in the middle of the night at the sound of the siren, and quickly get up and ran down to the basement into an apartment that until recently was occupied by the super.

My mother was very afraid of the air raids, but heroically waited for my grandfather, until he got dressed, tie and all, because he refused to appear shabbily dressed in front of strangers. Finally, my mother asked my grandfather to sleep in his clothes, so she doesn't have to wait so long for him,

One day we read in the paper a new law by which every Jew has to wear a yellow star on the left side of the chest. This law sounded to us as if it came from the Middle Ages. My mother, without a sound, took one of her yellow summer dresses and made pretty stars of David with the ~~five~~ 36 points for every member of the family.

The beauty shop was still in full operation and my mother worked smilingly with the yellow star on her white smock.

Another news. All the Jews will have to move into a certain section of the town which then will be called a ghetto. Every Jew had to find their own living space there. The confusion was total now. A Jewish Committee was formed to help coordinate the movement but they were not too effective. My father finally found a small room in an apartment where every room now will contain a family.

And then our home, the sweet tranquil oasis had to be dismantled. My mother started to give away for safe keeping all our valuables, linens, china, knick knacks, clothing, a camera, etc. She gave those things mainly to Elisabeth Kovacs, the operator in the beauty shop. Elisabeth took these things with great enthusiasm- she just got married. I guess she needed those things. She started to gather things together freely, pulling things out of closets, drawers. Finally my mother said, "Please Elisabeth, don't take everything." When the officials take over our apartment they have to find some things here. Elisabeth reluctantly put some things back. My mother had to surrender her few jewels she has received from my father to the National Bank, so it was commanded. Nobody was thinking not to obey the law. Still the few rich Jews in our town were singled out and beaten half to death to reveal hidden treasures.

Our apartment became barren. All our belongings were now in suitcases. My mother's sister who lived in a nearby village wrote that they were moved to a nearby small town into a ghetto. Her four year old son kept asking her when will they go home and that why his mother was not baking cookies anymore. My mother got very upset and suffered for the fact that she can't help her sister. My mother was very close to her sisters and brothers.

I noticed little of these events. I lived in my own dream world. Remembering, reliving the lovemaking of that one night. I lived for the letters coming from my husband. Their unit was still in Budapest, and in one beautiful day he came in person instead of a letter. We had two days. When he left I felt I can't live without him. It looked so that his unit will stay in Budapest for who knows how long. I decided I will move to Budapest. Why not? I got married didn't I ? My mother in law, sisters in law were living in Budapest. I was sure they will take me in. And then I can see him every evening. Yes, yes, this is how it is going to be. This is how it has to be. When I told my parents of my decision, they were devastated. My mother begged me to give up this crazy idea. Budapest was already bombed several times, buildings collapsed, people died. She told me that there they will send me to work in a factory for war machinery and this is hard work she didn't think I was capable of. But I couldn't be swayed. I am moving, I am moving. I had no inkling that this very idea, leaving the security of my parents in these uncertain times will save my life.

Yes I am moving, but how? Jews were forbidden to travel and needed a special permit to do so, a permit which so far no one has got. But maybe certain people in high office in the city can help. My mother against her better judgement went and asked such people through their wives who were customers in the beauty shop. One of the big shots agreed to see me. The interviews didn't last long. He listened to my plea, how I just got married and wanted to be near my husband. Then he got up from behind his desk, came near to me and said, ""I get you the permit. But you have to come see me in the Korona Hotel. I have a room there. You are a pretty little Jewess and I like you."

I didn't know what to do, what to say. I just ran out. My mother who was waiting for me in the hall understood all without me having to tell her. She read my face.

Next day I had my fighting spirit back. I went with my mother to another big shot, with the local police. He told us he wouldn't and couldn't do a thing. He will not ask for a favor from the Germans – for a Jew, thereby giving the impression that he sympathizes with the Jews. My mother looked so tired and sad, she said "give it up my girl. Give it up."

But I couldn't give it up. I understood the Germans have to give the permission. To get to the Germans we had no avenue, no possible way. In spite of my parents terrible fears for me, I decided to go to the Gestapo headquarters. Next day I went to the house that no Jew dared to even pass in front of. I stood before the big heavy doors, hesitated a minute, then entered. I found myself in a hall, void of people. I saw several doors, didn't know which one to choose, finally opened one. I entered a sumptuously furnished room, with deep oriental carpets, paintings on the walls. Only a desk with a typewriter on it indicated that it was an office. A high ranking German officer sat behind the desk. With steel blue eyes, he looked at me as if I was some strange kind of animal. My heart could not acknowledge fear, I had to speak so I told him what I came here for, in my best school German. He just said no. No explanation, not one more word, just "nein" – no.

I went again the next day. The hall was not empty this time. A low rank S.S. soldier sat on a chair. A young man with a freckled face. "What do you want here" he asked. "I came for a travel permit." And before he had a chance to answer me I entered in another door. Another elegant room. Another German officer with a merciless face saying no.

I went there every day, never losing my nerve, never losing hope. Finally I was told that

I would be arrested if once again I enter the Gestapo building. I didn't go there anymore. My brother came home. Everybody was sent home. He still had his long pants and the oil painting in his suitcase.

We were together again, but for how long? Next week we will have to move into the ghetto. I was sad, dispirited. So I thought, I will have to move into the ghetto, but I felt it impossible to imagine that my just starting to bloom 18 year old passionate life will be enclosed in the ghetto. But I was preparing for the move. I burned all my love letters. I was looking at the little package of letters bounded with a pink ribbon being consumed by the flames and I knew that my golden, secure happy youth has ended.

My father talked about going into hiding in the basement. In the attic? But all plans to hide seemed too fantastic, too unrealistic. Also we never believed that our lives are at stake. My father said "we will have to work for the Germans. Hard work – this is all."

Monday came. The last Monday in our home. I decided to try my luck one more time at the Gestapo. A redheaded S.S. officer sat by a desk, and after, I finished my speech, he reached for some kind of form, filled it in, stamped it and handed it to me. Just like this. When I looked at that permit, with the official stamp on it, I felt very calm. I will leave.

When my mother saw the permit, she started to cry. "So you will leave?" I started to tell her not to take this so tragically – after all I am not going to the end of the world, just to Budapest which is only four hours travel on the train. But my mother remained very sad.

Next day at dawn, when I got up to leave, it was still very dark. My mother got up to prepare my breakfast. The last one ever. Mercifully, we didn't know this then. My mother was not crying. Somehow she started to believe that she will get a permit and will go join me in Budapest.

I hugged my mother, kissed her once, only once. I never saw her again. During the years that had passed after this tragic moment I reenacted it many many times. Why didn't I hug her more closely, why didn't I kiss her more, why didn't I feel the importance of that moment. But blissfully I didn't.

My father accompanied me downstairs. We had to say goodbye in front of my building. Jews were not allowed on the streets at this hour so my father couldn't go further. I found myself on the empty still dark street, the street of my childhood. The sound of my steps were the only sound I heard. With the gleaming yellow star on my chest, I walked ahead

not looking back to the house, the beloved house of my young years. I wasn't sad. I was thinking that in the evening I will see my husband. I was walking on the empty dark street, the same street I used to walk laughingly with my friends – not a care in the world. But now the street was empty and silent. Mid-day I arrived in Budapest.

II

My mother in law, Bandi's sister and brother lived on the fifth floor, in a nice modern apartment. My mother in law opened the door for me, and seemed happy to see me. She looked so much like my husband, I liked her instantly.

The time until evening when my husband will come home seemed endless. But finally Bandi arrived, took me in his arms. I looked in his grey luminous eyes – and was happy. This is what I was fighting for. The days passed. I was living for the moment when Bandi came home.

Letters arrived from home; "We live in a little room now. It is not comfortable, but we are together – this is the main thing. Now I am happy that you are not here. Your father and Gyuri send their kisses – Mother " I was thinking of ways to go back to Miskolc for my mother. But would she leave the rest of the family, where would we live here, if I succeeded somehow. I really didn't know how to get her out of the ghetto. Everything seemed so complicated. Had I known what will be coming, would I had the courage to go get her? Later, after I knew her fate, I made many rescuing missions to get her – in my dreams and in my waking hours. But in June 1944, I was afraid to act boldly. I was still not aware – how could I have been – that we have nothing to lose.

Another letter. "Your father and brother were taken in a forced labor camp. I am alone with grandfather." I still didn't do anything.

Finally, one last hastily written postcard. "We are being transported, we don't know where. Take care of yourself and take care of your father and brother. Write to them often. I so wanted to see you once more. Your mother." This was the last communication I ever received from my mother. But of course I didn't know this then.

When my husband came home that night and found me crying, he consoled me by saying that it will be all right, they are taken to work in factories, they will be treated well, there is no reason to despair. I believed him because I wanted to believe this, I had to believe this. The tears in my eyes had dried.

Life began to take form. I got a job in a beauty shop, where I worked all day and the evenings were spent in the company of my husband, the nights in his arms.

One day I heard that some people from Miskolc are being retained in a city jail. After a long trip on the tram, I find that jail I a middle of a large leafy garden. It didn't look like a jail. I opened the big front door timidly to find myself in a hall with a bald fat man sitting on a chair.

I asked about ~~people~~ JEWS from Miskolc being incarcerated here, and asked him if I could see them, maybe someone I know is among them. Maybe my mother is among them. "You are looking for your mother? You better just turn around quickly and get the hell out of here before I put you in right with them." And he bodily threw me out the door. I started to cry. I was never in my life treated so harshly, spoken to so coarsely. Still I didn't leave. I went around the building looking at windows, insanely hoping to see my mother's face in one of them. But the windows looked at me blankly and silently. On my way back in the tram, I sat very sad , empty. The ticket handler sat down beside me asking why I was so sad. He asked me if I was hungry. Before I could answer he pulled his lunch BOX from under the seat and shared his lunch with me. He saw the yellow star on my chest but paid no attention to it. He warmed my suddenly frozen heart. Here was a human being. So maybe not everybody turned into monsters. Suddenly I saw through the window a girl standing, a girl I knew from Miskolc, a Jewish girl, standing on the sidewalk, not wearing the yellow star. I didn't know what to make of it. I got off the tram and ran to this girl. She didn't seem to be happy to see me, she said that she was living as a Christian and hurried away. I didn't understand what she meant. How can she live as a Christian? I had no idea. Much later I understood it all.

And the letters came. From my father, from my brother and one from one of my uncles, a brother of my mother – Uncle Frank, a pharmacist. He had a pharmacy in a little sleepy village. A big house with lots of cool, dark rooms where you could smell the pharmacy. I spent lots of wonderful summer vacations there. When Uncle Frank was a young officer in the Austro-Hungarian army in the First World War, at the end of the war he found himself in charge of two wagons full of priceless medicine. Somehow he got the wagons back to Budapest. But in the big confusion he couldn't find any office that would take the

medicines off his hands. Finally after many days of trying he found an officer who gave him a document with two stamps on it. He was immensely relieved, went home, a civilian again. The medicines in those wagons were worth a fortune, but it never occurred to my uncle that he could simply disappear with it. Even when he plainly could see that no one knew of its existence. So he remained an ill paid pharmacist assistant, didn't get married until he was forty-five and to a woman he was not in love with but with whose dowry he could buy a pharmacy – not in Miskolc, but in a small town. He asked me for food, in his letter, he said he was starving in that forced labor camp. Later all the doctors and pharmacists in that camp were shot to death one early dawn. Among them was my uncle.

A month passed by. One night my husband came home with the news that their unit will be leaving Budapest tomorrow. He didn't know where. I took this news surprisingly calmly. I didn't cry. But the next day when we were standing among the departing men with their wives crying, babies looking with their innocent eyes on their fathers, then I cried.

I was then totally alone, 18 years old, with no life experience outside the sheltered home. Luckily I didn't think about it. I didn't feel despair. I still had my mother in law, sister in law. They were family.

I couldn't go to work any more. The Jews in Budapest were concentrated in designated Jewish houses and were allowed to go outside only two hours a day. Luckily our building was designated a "Jewish house" so we didn't have to move.

All the rest of the country's cities villages down to the smallest hamlet now was free of Jews. We in Budapest just waited holding our breath for our turn. This is how we lived in the big apartment house of which we were now prisoners. We were waiting for this insane era to end, but when will it end?

Every night there were air raids. We ran down the five flights of steps as quick as we could, still many times, as we reached the third floor bombs already started to fall. One night a bomb fell on a house across the street. Luckily, we were already down in the air shelter. It felt as if the bomb had fallen on our building. The fire across the street created a terrible heat in our shelter. We ran our in search of another shelter. I ran like crazy into a shelter down the street. This was not a Jewish house, but the people there let us in, even

gave us water to drink.

Days passed. I went shopping for food with my mother in law, food which was increasingly more difficult to procure. Still, somehow every day we found something. I helped in the kitchen, sat on the balcony taking in the sun, reading, again just waiting, but I didn't know for what! My job was to clean the apartment every morning. I never did this kind of work before, but I did it now best I could. One day my sister in law scolded me ~~of~~ FOR not dusting well enough leaving too much dust on furniture. I answered her irritated that why is she worrying of a little dust, when a bomb can fall on the house anytime, making a lot of dust. From this a big argument ensued, with my mother in law starting to complain about my various offences. The argument became so violent that suddenly I heard myself saying that I will leave her tomorrow morning. They didn't say anything. The following morning I packed my little suitcase. When my mother in law saw that I am really leaving, she asked me not to leave. Where would I go, such a young woman, without any money. But she couldn't sway me. Suddenly my life seemed so arid, closed in this apartment with these two women, one an old lady, the other a capricious old maid. I tried to quiet my mother in law explaining best I could that she shouldn't feel that they are chasing me out. I want to leave.

I had a cousin living in Budapest who came to the big city to try her luck a few months before the German occupation. She was a very pretty twenty four year old girl.

She was working as a nanny. To this cousin was I now going. Maybe she will let me stay with her for a few nights.

As the electric tram started to move, me sitting with the little suitcase at my feet – as I was just waiting for this moment, my tears started to flow. I didn't care that people were looking at me . young woman with the yellow star on her chest – crying. And I couldn't stop crying. When I finally looked through the window I realized I took the wrong tram. On the next stop, I got off and found myself in a totally unknown part of Budapest. I was just standing there on the sidewalk crying. Then I became aware that somebody is looking at me. It was a young man, no yellow star on him. I went to the opposite side of the street. I noticed he followed me. He said to me " why are you crying?" For some reason I got mad and answered him. "Why am I crying? Oh, it's really nothing, no big deal. I have no money, I have no place to stay, I am not allowed to work. But what would

you know about this misery. To be Jewish. Oh, don't bother me please." The man didn't leave. He took my hand, looked into my eyes and asked, "Are you from Budapest?' I said "no, I am from Miskolc." He was still holding my hand, still looking in my eyes when he said, "Then for heavens sake, remove that yellow star." In this moment a light lit up in my head. Yes, yes. All my misery is caused by this yellow star. This is why I am not allowed to work, why I have no place to live. Suddenly, I felt that yellow star on my grey suit jacket as a great weight. Intolerable. I didn't think of the danger can befall me if found without a yellow star on me. To be caught on the street without a star would mean instant deportation. I didn't think of anything else but the freedom I will have without the yellow star and followed the man into a dark courtyard where he took the star off with the help of a pocket knife, carefully removing every trace of it from my jacket. I took a deep breath – I felt so light, so happy, how did I ever live with the star on my chest? Afterwards, walking on the street I scarcely heard as the man started to tell me how he will supply me with Christian papers.

We went to a barber shop where the man had a shave. I sat waiting for him there. It was the first time for months that I felt like a human being. When we finished in the barber shop it was five o'clock. I was waiting to see what will come next. He said he has to go visit somebody in the hospital.

"Do you want to wait for me in a café?" I got scared, thought that the man is trying to get rid of me.

"No, no. I want to go with you." The man was smiling at me, and took me with him. We were visiting a woman. She already had a few visitors. They talked among themselves in a Slavic language which I didn't understand. Then more visitors came who were talking Hungarian. They were discussing the Jewish question approving the plan of getting rid of all the Jews "any which way we can." The man was part of the discussion agreeing with all. I was thinking that naturally the man has some horrible plan for me. I was planning my escape. When we left the hospital I asked the man to sit with me on a bench. I wanted to talk. It started to get dark. I asked the man to please take me back to the spot where he took the yellow star off of me. Lets look for it, it will be surely still there. No one could have found it in that dark alley. I wanted to put the yellow star back. I said I heard him and the others talking about the Jews with so much hatred – so I don't know

now what he wants with me.

The man looked at me with sad eyes, leaned toward me and said, "You silly girl – I am a Jew and all the people you met in the hospital were Jews."

This can't be true. How can you talk about the Jews the way you did if you are one."

"You will have to learn to talk this way too. We have to pretend to be the worst anti-Semites, this way people are not suspicious of us."

I still didn't believe him. I asked him to recite a Hebrew prayer. And the man in the descending darkness among the noises of the busy street leaned close to me and recited a prayer I used t say in my childhood, every evening in bed before I fell asleep. "Mode ani lefonecha." I closed my eyes, Budapest disappeared, the cruel changes this past months brought had disappeared. I was in my white bed in my parents bedroom. My bed was at the foot of their bed. The reading lamp above my father's bed is lit. He is reading. My mother is standing by the stove to warm her back at the dying fire which made a red glow on the floor. I am sitting up in bed praying, " Mode ani lefonecha."

When I opened my eyes again I was still sitting on the same bench. It was six o'clock. By my feet my little suitcase, beside me the stranger who just now became my brother. I took his hand and asked his name. "Call me Jani. This isn't my real name. My real name is not important now. We will now go to a café where we will meet my friends who will supply you with papers." Two young men were waiting for us in the café. Laszlo and Istvan. I felt almost happy. Suddenly things seemed like an adventure. I totally forgot the danger we all were in. I sat down to their table, as if I would be on an outing with my friends. There were not many explanations about me, Jani said, "This girl needs papers."

"She shall have it" said Laszlo. We had supper, then they discussed among themselves where I should spend the night. They decided on a girl living way out in the suburbs. I had never been in that part of town, full with elegant villas. I happily inhaled the fragrant summer air. We find the girl at home. A very thin blonde, fidgety and nervous. But she received us with hospitality and find it natural that the boys had brought a total stranger to spend the night. She lived in the villa of the Bosnian ambassador. She rented a little attic room. When we were left alone she told me that on the second floor German officers lived and that she has fallen in love with one of them. She is sure he likes her too.

Of course ~~the soldier couldn~~'t in his wildest dreams imagine that the pretty blond he is

flirting with is a Jew. I listened to her story with great interest and find nothing wrong with being in love with a German soldier. After all there were some very handsome men among them. I didn't know yet the feeling of hatred. A lot had to happen until into my innocent heart came hard – cold hatred. But now, I sat, 18 years old and with great fascination gleaming eyes I listened to my new friend's story. We were chatting like this like two young girls would. One thing we didn't talk about were our families. She didn't ask where I was from and I didn't either. We tried each others dresses on, created new hairstyles for ourselves, laughed a lot and then went to sleep.

I slept deeply, I didn't dream. I didn't think of anybody or anything. I slept.

In the morning with a towel on my arm going to the bathroom, I met German soldiers in the hall. They greeted me very politely. I smiled at them, trying to figure out which one was the one the girl loved. I had a little money, took the tram downtown after the girl went to work and we said our good byes. I was walking the streets of downtown Budapest, free. It was intoxicating. I even enjoyed the feeling of not having anybody, not belonging to anybody. I was never this free before. I encountered Jews walking , with the yellow star on their chest. Their eyes were beseeching, looking at me as if they would be saying "Don't hurt me please." I wanted to go up to them and whisper in their ears – "I am one of you, don't look at me like this." Of course I couldn't do this, so I tried not to look at them.

I had a date with Laszlo and Istvan at noon in the same café we were yesterday. We had a good dinner. Then we took the tram to another suburb, this one was a poor neighborhood. The boys rented a room on the second floor. Nobody else was home in the big apartment and the boys moved around as if they owned it. Apparently, the owners trusted them completely – never suspecting them being Jews. I have never seen such dirty neglected place in my life. When I entered the boys' room it was even dirtier. The beds unmade with very dirty linen, thick dust on furniture. But the boys seemingly didn't notice this squalor. They smiled one me, I smiled back, ashamed of myself to turn my nose up like this, these boys will give me papers, they are doing this without any reward, risking their life in the process. I sat down on a dusty chair and watched as they produced a little black valise from under the bed, unlocked it. From it a whole document producing factory emerged. Empty birth certificates, stamps, different inks, etc. There in this filthy

room these boys had created the false papers to save as many lives as they could. They made me a birth certificate, a marriage certificate. "What name do you want " they asked. "I want Elisabeth Kovacs" I choose the name of the girl worked for my mother. I observed this girl for years, her way of talking, behaving, her mental capacity. I knew her life story. I realized I will have to play a role. I have to become Elisabeth Kovacs, or somebody like her. I can't be Agnes anymore, the beloved daughter of a warm, happy family, spoiled, protected, the apple of the eyes of my parents. I will have to be a girl for whom no one cares, a girl who is used to a tough life, first by her parents neglect, then the tough mercilessness of the streets. . A girl who lives in cheap rented rooms, who gets no mail, who has no visitors and eats in cheap shabby restaurants.

So Elisabeth Kovacs was born. Mother's name, Anna Nagy. Father's name, Istvan Kovacs. Born October 24, 1925 in Miskolc. Father's occupation, shoe repair, mother's, cleaning woman and laundress. This will be my history. This is me now. I felt I can play this role, and I knew I will have to play it very well. The punishment for bad acting could be death. I remembered that I still had all my Jewish papers under my pocket book lining. I took out my work permit and asked the boys if they could change the name and religion on it. They took out my name with some special chemical, and wrote in my new name and religion. So I can go to work. Now I felt totally secure and ready to embark on my new life. Of course my youthful optimism and fearlessness – which was a blessing – and totally unfounded. We all were in great danger. A few months later. Walking on Andrassy Street, I saw a small group of men being led by arrowcross police. I recognized among them Laszlo and Istvan. I haven't seen them in months but they recognized me. They were beaten, bloody. Istvan was holding a blood soaked handkerchief under his nose. Laszlo without a hat, in a white shirt with a big bloody spot on his back. The passers-by looks at them without interest. It was an everyday spectacle. I knew by then what the arrowcross people did with Jews so captured – on the street with false papers. They were taking them to their headquarters to be shot. I stopped and totally forgot to play Elisabeth Kovacs. My instinct was to run to them to do something. Although I knew I can't do anything. The boy's eyes rested on me for a minute as if saying – don't move, don't recognize us. You can't help us, but you can be thrown in with us in a minute. My heart became icy. Not with fear, but with infinite sadness. A sadness so profound that it

stayed with me from then on forever. But this was still in the future. Let's go back to that room where we were sitting. We heard the front door opening. The owners came back, a woman and her son. I was introduced – Elisabeth Kovacs – an old friend. I shook hands with them and was chatting with them. Just a few minutes before, I was helping the boys hide all the evidence of what we were doing there before. But I was calm. Totally calm. Laszlo's eyes rested on me with admiration. As if he would say – you are a perfect Elisabeth Kovacs. I can't imagine a truer version of it. And something else was in his eyes. He had fallen in love with me. His eyes conveyed such desire, such passion, I was afraid to look in them.

It was late afternoon. Laszlo and I started out to the villa where I slept last night. We were carefree and in a good mood. We walked hand in hand, two young people, me 18, he 20. Elisabeth Kovacs and Laszlo Szanto. The girl was not home. I was supposed to sleep there that night and Laszlo promised to help me find a room the next day. Laszlo wanted to go to a restaurant until the girl will be home.

We entered an elegant restaurant, went to its garden where a gypsy band was playing. Laszlo ordered champagne. I asked will this not be too expensive? "Dear Elisabeth, I have plenty of money. You know, that little service I did for you free of charge, well. Others who want this service and has money, pay for it handsomely." We started to consume the champagne. I was drinking very little but Laszlo was drinking a lot. He got slightly drunk. He started to sing. He had a very good voice. He sang in a low voice – to me – a song I never heard before. "There are streets where everybody is crying. The name of the street is sorrow, and this is where I live." He had tears in his eyes. He grabbed my hands and whispered in my ear.

"I couldn't help them. My mother and two young sisters, they were taken – no I had no way of helping them." He squeezed my hands so hard – I gave out a little cry of pain. Laszlo came back to the present, put on his mask again – the face that doesn't betray any emotion, the way he was when I met him. I never saw him crying again, but now I knew what was behind the gaiety the bravado he displayed.

I slept badly that night. In the darkness of the night, I thought of my father, mother,

brother, husband. They appeared in the darkness. I felt torment of not knowing where they are and what is happening to them. So I suffered until merciful oblivion came with sleep. When I woke up in the morning, I was cheerful, courageous and ready for anything.

I spent the morning looking for work. It was easy. The beauty shops were busy, women of Budapest wanted to look good no matter what. I was hired in a small shop and was hanging around there until noon when I was going to meet Laszlo in the usual café. He said he had found a room for me. A big room which I will have to share with two other girls. The land lady said they are very decent girls. One is a cashier in a restaurant, the other is working in the post office. I said this was okay with me. I wanted to get the rest of my things from my mother in law's house, and also wanted them to let know what's happening with me. It has been three days since my departure and they heard nothing of me since. Also, I was hoping to have mail, from my husband and family.

I wrote a short note to let my mother in law know what is going on and asked her to give my clothes and what mail I may have to the presenter of the note. We took a taxi to Pannonia Street. I sat in the cab, looking at the house where I was happy for a short time. I couldn't imagine my life in that house again. I was happy to be free, to be fighting and not waiting for the merciless enemy to decide my fate, that I was and not they the master of my fate. Then Laszlo appeared with my big suitcase and the taxi drove away with me, taking me far away from my previous life into the unknown perilous future.

A bright nicely furnished room was shown to me by the plump, friendly landlady. When I was left alone I started to take off the yellow stars from my garments from the suitcase which were sewn on carefully by my mother, not long ago. I was suddenly disturbed by the landlady, who came with the necessary papers to the police which everybody had to fill out with a new home address. She apologized for bothering me, but said in this uncertain times she likes to do the papers as soon as a new tenant arrives. She put down the forms and left. I thought, "She suspects me. My god she suspects me." My heart started to beat fast and I wanted to flee. But slowly I got a hold of myself. "What's the matter with you. What is this cowardice? You are not suspected. Why would you be? If you get panicky so quickly you are not playing the game well." So I tried to calm myself. I was given a narrow folding bed, the two other girls occupied the two twin beds. My bed

looked very uncomfortable. But I didn't complain. I put my dresses in the big armoire, the photo of my husband on the mantle and it was home. I got tired, it was already evening, so I went to bed, and fell asleep immediately. I didn't know what time it was when I was awakened by the light in the room and noises. My two roommates were conversing. One was a pretty brunette, the other a blond, wearing heavy makeup. They sat on their beds chatting. I pretended to be asleep and listened. The blond said, "It was a slow night. The first guy I was with cheated me, didn't give me the full price I asked. After that I only had two more guys - creeps. God damn it."

I was listening to the conversation and under the blanket I was shaking. I realized what this girl was. I have never been around people like her and I almost fainted at the thought to be in the same room with her in such almost intimate way. The girls noticed that I was awake and stopped talking. The blond said to me, "Your ladyship is eavesdropping? Come out from under the blanket we want to see your mug. Introduce yourself."

I sat up, smiled at them and answered her in the same coarse language. "What the hell do you want? I have to go to work tomorrow morning. Let me sleep." But the girls wanted to know my story.. So I said I was from Miskolc, I hated small town living – so I came to Budapest. My father is an alcoholic pig who doesn't care about me , my mother is not interested in me either. The girls agreed. Pretty girls can find their fortune here in Budapest much easier. I pulled the blanket over my head and thought, "How easy, my God, how easy this whole thing is. A different name, a different story this is all. But I decided to ask Laszlo the next day to find me another place because I didn't want to stay there.

I didn't go to work the next morning. I spent the time until noon when I was to meet Laszlo walking around. When I met him. I told him what kind of girls I was going to have to live with. He was very sorry and promised to find another place. He decided to got to a real estate office. I find it quite natural that he took care of me, paid my dinners, paid for the fee in the real estate office. I knew he was in love with me, but we never talked about it. In the real estate office we were received by a young woman, with such typical Aryan face, I thought with such a face one never would have to be afraid to be taken for a Jew. You don't even need papers with such a face – I thought. She was dressed very elegantly and seemed very busy. She gave us a few addresses. We went

around with a taxi to look at them, one was too expensive, the other dirty, the third was already taken. We went back to the office. I was very upset that I will have to go back to the room, to be again in the company of that blond girl with her disgusting stories. I told about this to the girl in the office. She listened to me with sympathy and suddenly said.

"You know what – there is a big, very clean bright room, with two beds – available on Nagymezo Street. You and I could take the room together. I am also unhappy with my present place. If you like it, you can move in immediately." I was very surprised and happy that this wonderful girl wanted me for her roommate. Without seeing the room I said yes.

The room really was very nice. Two comfortable beds, side by side. I was a little taken aback by the proximity of the beds. I couldn't imagine sleeping so close to that stranger. I put away my clothes again, the photo of my husband on the night table, so this was now home. A short time later my new roommate arrived with three huge suitcases from which countless expensive looking garments emerged, and beautiful lingerie, a record player and even an electric iron. She said, "My name is Judy." I said, " My name is Elisabeth."

Then I started to tell her a story about this good looking German officer who wants to go out with me. But, somehow I felt that I sounded phony. So I quit talking.

When we went to the landlady's rooms, I find out that she is a beautician and has a shop downstairs. In no time we agreed on the salary, so I had found lodgings and work on the same day. We didn't talk much – Judy and I. I sensed that she isn't interested in what I was saying.

The first night I spent sleeping quietly, in comfort. Next day I went to work in the white uniform of the hairdressers of that time. The days passed. I routinely met with Laszlo for lunch, sometimes Istvan was also there. I sent Laszlo back to my mother in law and he brought me three letters. From my husband, father and brother. I was very happy to read those letters. Happy to know that they were alive. There was no letter from my mother. I thought, "next time I will have one from her."

Judy and I got along very well. She had a boyfriend and when he came to visit I went for a long walk. One day Laszlo showed up with theatre tickets for the evening. When we entered the theatre, I realized that I have been there with my brother and mother long ago,

when we saw a play of Moliere. We laughed so much, and my mother was so happy to see me having a good time. This time they showed a propaganda play, the name of it was, "The Innocents." It depicted in three scenes evidences that the Jews were far from being innocent, on the contrary the Jews are guilty of every vice imaginable. It was a badly written, badly acted play, depicting a terrible picture of the Jews.

The audience loved it. Thunderous applause, many curtain calls. We applauded too. We had to. It was a terrible evening.

Laszlo started to be more aggressive, confessing his love for me, but I felt only a deep friendship for him. I felt no desire for physical love, my 18 years old body which not long ago was awakened by Bandi, was now quiet. Laszlo bought me presents, books, candy and big bottles of French perfumes. I took everything, thanked him and nothing changed.

I became good friends with Judy. We took baths together in the big tub in the bathroom, washed each other's back. We wore each other's dresses. Judy ate the candy Laszlo bought, read the books. I played her record player, used her iron. We were roommates.

But then Judy started to bring guests home in the evening. First a young heavy set girl with braids, twice a blond young woman. These guests then spent the night with us. Sleeping with Judy. I was very unhappy about this because I like to read in bed and Judy and her guests were talking, laughing late into the night. I told Judy about my being unhappy about this. We had a little exchange of words, and didn't talk to each other for a few days. But there were no more guests.

I had some difficulty at work too. My boss had a 20 year old daughter who I felt looked at me with suspicion. One day I heard piano music from the next room. When I entered, this girl was playing. When I saw the well known black and white keyboard, I forgot my roll. I forgot that Elisabeth Kovacs does not play the piano. I felt this wild desire to play, to feel the smoothness of the ivory under my fingers. I asked her if I could play some. After the first few melodies, I look up and saw the girl looking at me with searching cold eyes. I remembered who I was now, jumped up and ran back to my room. After this, I felt those eyes of the girl always on me – looking, observing, judging. One day I was complaining of a toothache and saying that there are only Jewish dentists in this neighborhood. I don't know where to find an Aryan doctor. The girl said, " I think you can very well go to a Jewish dentist." From this moment on I was afraid of her. I knew

that I don't have a typical Aryan face but I also knew that I don't have a typical Jewish face either. Sort of a generic face I thought I have. But I had black hair and I wanted, wished to be blond, to feel safer. These feelings of insecurity, of fear made me withdrawn and quiet. I felt good only at night, in my bed reading a good book.

One night I noticed that Judy wasn't reading just laying in bed beside me looking up to the ceiling. Then I heard her saying my real name – Agnes. I was frozen with fear. What's happening ? How can she know my real name? I pretended to read on, like I didn't hear her. Then she repeated my name now louder – "Agnes."

"What's the matter with you Judy? Why are you calling me this name? You know my name is Elisabeth."

"The hell it is Elisabeth. Don't deny it, I looked through your things and under the lining of one of your pocketbooks I find this."

She put down in front of me my old papers and a few snapshots.

Suddenly I felt very tired, and indifferent to my fate.

"What will you do?"

Of course I will call the arrowcross police. I have to, don't you see?"

I started to cry and asked Judy to please let me just go away. I cried a long time, Judy just sitting beside me real quiet.

Then she said, "Blow your nose and look at me."

I saw a soft, smiling face, a Judy I never saw before.

"Don't cry and don't be afraid of me. I am Jewish, too."

I looked at her with astonishment. "You-Jewish? This can't be so."

"Yes it is so – look" She got a small snapshot out of a secret pocket, of a hospital bed, Judy lying on it, above her head the name Ethel Weiss. Now I believed her. We kissed, then cried together. After this we were talking quietly of our previous lives, of our lost paradises. Then Judy stated that we can't – shouldn't live together. She said that she feels I am not careful enough, that my papers are not good enough forgeries while hers were authentic. She said she can't chance me being caught, tortured – I would denounce her. I was trying to contradict her , but nothing I said could convince her me not being a great risk. I so wanted to stay with her, with this dear, clever, strong girl with no secrets between us, we could become sisters. But I had to admit she was right.

We were talking all night long, talking and crying. Judy told me that the night visitors were Jews who had no place to sleep. I wished now I had known this and that they had known that I wasn't an enemy. . I shared their fate.

Every evening after this I was looking for a room. One day I had lunch with Laszlo and Istvan in a nearby restaurant. We were in a good mood. The weather was good. We had goose liver for lunch. We joked, we laughed, as we left the restaurant. Then we heard, "you men stay behind, the girl can go." I was terror stricken. I looked back, saw Laszlo and Istvan pulling out their papers and showing it to two plain clothes detectives. Both boys were dead pale.

I was wearing my white hairdresser's uniform, so it wasn't strange for the passers-by to see me suddenly start running. They could think I was late for work. I ran –ran back to the beauty shop, but didn't go to work. I went up to my room. I knew I can't stay here. The boys will be tortured, they can give my name. I took the uniform off, put regular clothes on, went down to the shop and with some excuse I asked the afternoon off. A minute later I was part of the mingling crowd on the avenue.

Where to go? I suddenly remembered the flat of my mother-in-law so quiet up on the fifth floor. It's been a long time since I was there. Why couldn't I go there now?

I decided to go there. When I reached the house, I put my pocketbook on the left side of my chest, where the yellow star would have to be and so I crept by the window of the super's little cubicle. The house was very quiet in the early afternoon hours. People went shopping or doing other necessary things in the city while they had the permit to be out. My mother in law and sister in law received me warmly. They questioned me about my life. Here among the antique furniture, standing where they have stood for years, looking at my mother in law, her silver hair gleaming, head bent, knitting, my adventures, all I had lived through the past few weeks seemed unreal. That my friends were caught, that I have no place to sleep that night. This was reality now. The grandfather clock quietly ticking, the china figurines – carefully arranged gleaming on the shelves.

I lied down on the couch. It was so good, closing my eyes, not thinking. Suddenly in the quiet, I felt a sharp pain in my heart. I don't know how or why, in this moment I realized I was alone. My family was scattered – far away from me in unknown places and that I may never see them again. I felt such despair, such worry about them. A cry came up

from so deep, a cry I never heard myself crying. My mother in law looked at me with great alarm, I seemed so composed before and now I am howling uncontrollably seemingly on the verge of passing out. She tried to quiet me, but I didn't hear her. I was tossing, turning my head, may face, hair was drenched with tears which like a swollen river fallen from my eyes. I don't know how long this attack lasted, but it ended slowly, changing into sobbing and then quiet. I lay there my eyes closed, I felt deadly tired and sad. When I finally sat up, I took my compact out of my pocketbook, powdered my nose, said goodbye to my mother and sister in law and left.

On the street I walked purposefully and alertly. I thought I have to telephone Judy, ask her advice, maybe she will know a place where I can sleep. As I was dialing Judy's number I was totally in control. I wasn't even sad anymore. I told Judy I have to talk to her about a very important thing of which I can't talk about on the phone. We agreed to meet on a busy corner, in the evening. I was walking the streets on the rest of the afternoon. I was window shopping.

Judy was on that corner exactly at 6 o'clock. I told her what happened with the boys. She said "I am not worried because the boys don't know that I am Jewish. But of course you can't come home for a while. Unfortunately, I don't know of any place for you to sleep. My God, Elisabeth, what are you going to do?"

"Don't worry Judy, it will be all right. I will find a place to sleep."

Judy then departed, leaving me standing on the corner, with very little money, and no luggage. Then my adventurous nature took over, I started to feel amused by the fact that I am standing with no place to sleep come night. I remembered a friend of my mother. A Christian woman whose address I knew. Half hour on the tram took me to her house. I was told by a woman who answered the doorbell that they moved out of the city. What now? I felt despair, as I walked slowly down the steps in my high heeled navy shoes, a little red hat on my black hair., wearing a light gray suit with a red carnation in my buttonhole. I must of looked to anybody who would see me a puzzlement, why is this well dressed young girl looking so troubled?

I almost collided with a tall well dressed young man who was walking up the steps.

"What's the matter young lady. You can fall down the steps if you are not careful."

I looked into his kind face. A second ago, I didn't know of his existence, but here he was

standing in front of me, smiling. He will help me I thought. I smiled at him and said, "I was deep in thought, because I have many problems." "Really. Well can I be of any help?"

"I was going to ask you just that." The young man turned around and started walking down the steps with me.

"Well, little girl, what's the big problem?"

"Oh, nothing so grave, only I don't know where to sleep tonight."

He looked at me surprised. He didn't think that this kind of problem could be in the life of a girl who looked like me.

"Well, this is a delicate problem dear……"

"Elisabeth," I said.

"Well, Elisabeth, so this is what kept you so preoccupied? Who would have thought. And why aren't you going to sleep at home, if I may ask?"

"I had a fight with my parents. I want to be a dancer, but they want me to marry a shopkeeper who wears bow ties and glasses. I left home and don't intend to go back."

The man tried to persuade me very hard – to go back home. He said that my parents must be frantically searching for me by now. I had to make up additional explanations and stories to convince him of why not being able to go home and that he has to figure out where I can spend the night.

"Well, if it is so, then I will call Mother maybe she will let you stay with us."

Later, I find out that Misi, my new friend –was bored with his job, bored with his life, he felt the sameness of his days depressing – then he met me, and I was different. Only he didn't know just how different I was.

He called home from a little restaurant where he was well known.

I was waiting for him by a table and he came back with a beaming face saying it is all arranged, if I want to we can go home immediately.

He rang the doorbell and a woman of about fifty opened the door in a flowered house dress. She didn't acknowledge me, but smiled at Misi and disappeared.

I was expecting a warm family home, with mother and father and maybe even sisters and brothers. I was standing in the dark hall a little apprehensive. I felt Misi taking my hand, leading me into a big nicely furnished room. I saw two beds, both made up for the night. I took my jacket, hat, gloves off, sat on a chair and said, "Misi, I think you owe me some explanation."

"Okay. The woman you saw is not my mother. I rent this room."

"Why did you deceive me?"

"When I understood that you really will not go home, and because I like you very much, I was not going to let you wander the night streets of Budapest. I didn't want you to meet

with some man who could take advantage of you. I will not touch you. You can be sure."
His blue eyes looked at me with such sincerity I forgot all my uneasiness and felt safe. We did some crossword puzzles, we looked at some pictures, and was talking, conversing, having fun. It has gotten late. We had to go to bed. I had nothing with me. Misi found a pink robe in the bathroom and brought it to me. The robe was enormously big for me, but it was okay for sleeping.

Misi stood by the window looking out to the dark city. I joined him. We stood by the window quietly for a long time. Then Misi started talking.

"Elisabeth, you must go home. Don't be a stubborn child. You don't know the dangers of the city. You came with me so willingly, so trustingly, but I could have been a different kind of man. The kind that could and would ruin you. You don't know what the life of those ruined girls is like."

I was listening quietly, - going home. Me going home. Only if I could. I didn't say anything, just went to my bed. Misi smoked one more cigarette, and went to bed, too. Nothing happened.

Suddenly a terrible strong desire came over me to go to him and tell him everything . I went to his bed, sat down and started to cry, a quiet muted cry that didn't last long. Then I started to talk.

"I – I did not tell you the truth. I lied to you. But I want to tell you the truth. I would go home gladly, but I can't. Maybe never again. You don't suspect what my situation is? I have to tell you? It is hard for me to tell you, because I am afraid. Yes I am afraid even from you. My tragedy is that I am Jewish." It was very hard for me to make this confession, when it was out, I felt relief, as if a heavy weight would have been taken off my shoulders. Misi was astonished. He never had anything to do with Jews, their problems didn't interest him, but now, here I was skinny little thing with black hair, black eyes and I was talking, talking. Of my mother somewhere, I don't know where, of my father – brother in forced labor camps. Misi's face expressed the deepest sympathy. I wasn't afraid of him anymore. I held his hand in mine, asking him to be my friend, to help me, so I will not be alone in this frightening heartless city.

He embraced me, then kissed me. We made love innocently, tenderly, like two children playing. I fell asleep in his arms.

IV

Morning Misi told his landlady my made up story, which she listened to not quite believing it. Then we left the house. I called Judy on a public phone asking if she heard from the boys. Of my biggest joy she told me that the boys showed up the same night. Those men were not really detectives, just toughs who asked for money and when the boys paid they let them go. Then we went to the shop where I asked for the day off. All day Misi and I walked around the streets of Budapest, hand in hand. We had ice cream, ate dinner in a little inn.

It was a good day.

When I went home in the evening I had a big scene with Judy. She told me how foolish of me to go around with people like Laszlo and Istvan who are obviously watched by people who today wanted money, but tomorrow may want their life – just for fun.

She asked me not to go out with them anymore. I refused. Told her how lonely those boys are and that they are fond of me. Judy then gave me two days to move out of the room. That she could move , and I stay didn't occur to either of us.

So my biggest problem again was finding a room. By chance I noticed a small ad, pasted on the wall of a grocery store. "Looking for a roommate, wanted young Christian female. Big clean room." I went to look at it. The apartment was on the ground floor. A young girl, about my age, opened the door. I found myself in a dark hall smelling of cooking. The owner of the apartment was a heavy set woman. With tinted jet black hair, about 50, with a too sweet to be true behavior. She told me her name was Ilonka. The room was really nice, two beds side-by-side and a couch.

I moved in the same day.

When bedtime arrived, Aunt Ilonka pulled out a folding cot from under the beds and opened it, in front of a door. I immediately had the suspicion that it will be my bed. It was.

Aunt Ilonka slept in one of the beds, a blond girl whose name was also Elisabeth slept in the other, on the couch another girl. In the next room a woman lived by herself, and this seemed like the height of luxury to me. In the hall slept two young men, in the kitchen another two, and the tiny pantry was furnished with a bed, and there lived another young man. Aunt Ilonka rented every possible corner of her apartment. She read the newspaper

in bed. She adored the Germans, and had arguments with Elisabeth who was less enamored by the Germans and wasn't afraid to express it. The first night was spent quietly sleeping only I was awaken around midnight when the woman who lived in the next room came home and found me sleeping in the cot in front of her door. She simply crawled over me to open her door.

Morning everybody went to work. I decided not to go back to the shop I was working in. I decided to listen to Judy's warning who told me that if I continue to be so careless I will end up in the Avenue Andrassy 60, the headquarters of the arrowcross police where Jews who were found with forged papers were tortured and then shot in the basement. I was trying to break with Laszlo and Istvan. I had to find a new place of employment. I decided to go to the most elegant section of Budapest to seek out the best looking shops. I found it in a short time. It used to belong to a Jew, but now naturally, belonged to a German who lived in Hungary for a long time. He was very nice to me, and after the demonstration of my skills – I was hired. I so wanted my mother to know that I was working in such high class shop. The shop had twenty employees . We had our recreation room in the basement. It was a stuffy grimy dark place with no sign of the luxury upstairs that greeted the customers who were the elite of Budapest. Actresses, wives of diplomats, famous courtesans, all rich. I was constantly amused by this. I felt very good working there, and I was liked.

Misi and I met every night, and became very good friends.

Aunt Ilonka didn't approve of Misi. She told me, a pretty girl like me, who is making her way alone in life, is better off finding an older gentleman, with money who would be glad to spend it on me. She happened to know such a gentleman, if I wanted to she can introduce me to him.

I didn't want to . But so, I found out that Aunt Ilonka also dabbled as a sort of Madame.

There were air raids almost every night. We went next door into a big safe shelter.

Days passed. I was popular in the shop. One day my boss sent me to the famous quarter of Budapest where the most exclusive villas were. The woman whose hair I will have to fix was afraid to come to the inner city because of the air raids. The villa was beautiful. I arrived to find the family – young pretty blond wife, handsome husband and their little boy in the swimming pool. She immediately came out of the pool, put a big towel around

herself and took me through the spectacularly decorated rooms into a big beautiful bathroom. While I was working on her hair she talked to me. What was she talking about. Not of the latest play she saw in the theatre, not of her latest acquisition to her wardrobe. No! She was talking about the Jews, with such profound hatred I never heard before. "They make soap out of the Jews. You can believe me because I know it for a fact."

I had a strong desire to kill her. My desire was so strong, I looked around for a knife I could put in her heart. In the meantime I was continuing my work on her hair. My face didn't move a muscle, my eyes looked down. But all my soul and heart was on fire. Soap? To make soap out of people ? Dear God. And my mother is among the people who this woman is talking about. I don't know how I was able to continue my work maybe even smile. All I wanted to do was to hide some place and cry, cry, cry.

Later I went to a movie, because I knew it was a sad film, so in the darkness I could cry and no one would mind.

I became suspicious of my roommate Elisabeth. She never talked about her past, she had no relatives. She had an expensive wardrobe, but said her parents were peasants. I noticed, with my experienced eyes that her hair was bleached blond.

I was thinking maybe she is Jewish, too.

One Sunday afternoon we were alone in the room, standing by the window looking out into the quiet motionless street. I asked, "Elisabeth, what do you think of the Jews in general?"

From the way her face changed, I was sure I was not mistaken. She is my sister. I was sure. I wanted to know it – to hear it from her mouth. I leaned close to her and whispered, "Who are you?"

We looked into each others' eyes deeply, searchingly. We understood everything, but still couldn't admit anything – yet. She said, "You go first."

"All right. I will tell you. I am not afraid. My real name is Agnes."

"I am not afraid either. My real name is Klara."

This was all, and a handshake. We never talked about any of this again, but we knew we belong to the same group.

One night I went out to eat with the young man who lived in the pantry

Suddenly the restaurant was raided. Arrowcross police everywhere. The boy looked very

pale and nervous. I was not nervous. The police never got to our table. They found a victim and with it departed. It was a good thing too, because my papers were such bad forgeries, if they would have looked at it closely, I would have been lost.

I read the expression on my companion's face and I knew instantly that he was a Jew. Later he told me all about himself. He had a sister with forged papers in Budapest. He didn't have to work. He had enough money with him to last awhile.

I found it very amusing that in Aunt Ilonka's proud Christian house three Jews are living. I made a friend in the building. A young woman, wife of a doctor, who was an officer in the army. She was so man hungry, flirting with any man around. She was a mother of four, giving birth twice to twins. We really liked each other. Until one day when it was an air raid and a few people wearing yellow stars came down to the shelter from the street. My new friend was angry and asked the people around us to chase "the dirty Jews out." I couldn't sit still. I interfered and asked to let the Jews stay.

"Why are you defending those creatures?"

"They are human, just like you or I."

"No, you are wrong, they are not human. They are Jews."

I said nothing, but thought – look, your friend with whom you share your secrets, on whose shoulder you cry when you are sad who sits by your table – your friend – me, is a Jew. After this. I never talked to the woman again. She would ask me what did she do to hurt my feelings, but I just walked away.

In the shop, I found a girl one day I never met before. She was on a month's sick leave. I could sense that she disliked me on sight, but I didn't care. When I went down to the basement I find a pair of shoes on my lunch bag. It belonged to that girl. When she took it away, she made some kind of remark, that I soon will experience bigger hardship than this. The next day everybody was sitting around, we weren't busy that day. One was doing her nails, others were reading, talking.

Suddenly the girl, my enemy, said, "I suggest that everybody bring in their christening certificate, because we have suspicious characters among us."

But everybody was laughing at her. The next day around ten in the morning I saw the girl talking to the owner. Then I saw them looking at my working permit, holding it up to the light, shaking their heads. I sit down, because I felt my legs shaking. Then I saw my boss

coming toward me, with the working permit in his hand and with a stern face. I knew then, that it doesn't make sense for me to try to deny anything. I knew that the game was over. The owner in a cold stern voice told me that one of the girls cleverly suspected me of having a forged working permit, so I am suspected of being Jewish. Do I deny it?

I then said with dry eyes, but shaking voice, "No, I don't deny it. I am Jewish." He answered nothing just went out of my cubicle and locked the door. The cubicle had four walls, but no ceiling. It was airless with the door shut. I spent the whole day in there. I didn't eat, didn't go to the bathroom. I scraped the red nail polish off my nails, took off my lipstick and waited for the arrowcross police to come and take me. I knew I will die that day, but I wasn't afraid. I was sorry that I have to die at eighteen and that I will never see the ones I love again. They will shoot me. That doesn't hurt. I should write a letter to my mother. Maybe they will beat me. No, this can't be happening. I can't take it. And finally I cried. Then this passed too. I became numb. I felt hunger. I heard the noises of the shop, the humming of the dryers, the chatting of the women. I felt my loneliness, my helplessness, the abandonment of me by the world. What is my crime? Why do I have to die? No matter how hard I thought I couldn't come up with an answer. I was innocent.

Evening came. My little cubicle was the only dark spot in the lavishly lit shop. In this dark spot sat a scared little girl with chattering teeth. Darkness brought out tormenting fear. I felt the coarse hands of my tormentors on my body, the blows on my delicate skin. Slowly I heard the shop becoming quiet. Then I heard the voice of that girl – "when will the Jew be taken away, boss?"

I heard the owner's voice saying that he will take care of it. What, she doesn't trust him to do it? The girl just laughed at that. Later all noises ceased. Soon the door of my cell opened, my boss helped me off the chair, gently. Then he said, "Look, Elisabeth, I find you a very good hair dresser, a nice person, and now I am required to surrender you to a force I know knows no mercy. I can't do it. Here is your work permit, take it and run. But I must insist of you never coming into this district."

And then he said, "Christ, but you people are brave."

I had no time to thank him. I was out on the street, on the dear familiar streets of Budapest and free. I ran as if I was chased.

I never went near that district again.

V

But that incident left me weakened. Every hardship, every seemingly slight problem left traces on my soul. The few hours I spent waiting for my inquisitors left a permanent feeling of deep fear in me. I wasn't surprised that the boss had let me go. Then I still found the manifestation of good in humans, natural. If someone acted evil, that I found unnatural.

I lost my place of employment. I was dissatisfied with living in Aunt Ilonka's establishment, and Misi started to become a problem.

He was in love with me, and wanted me to be in love, too, but I wasn't and couldn't. My world was the world of a chased animal, a fugitive, a person when found, can and would be executed. My mind was on survival, my heart was heavy with grief. I wanted a friend in Misi, but he wanted a love affair.

One day Aunt Ilonka said she wants me out. Looking for a place again. This was becoming difficult lately. Rented rooms were sought after now. I found an ad for a room to rent in a newspaper, in a far away suburb. Sunday afternoon I went there – a long trip on the tram, almost to the country. I found the room already rented. I was walking slowly when I saw a pretty villa with a nice garden. I thought how nice it would be to live there. I stood by the white picket fence and looked at the quiet villa and the green grass surrounding it. Two women came out of the villa, and asked me who I was looking for. I said, "I heard there is a room here to rent. Of my biggest surprise one of them said, "Oh, yes, there is one in the backyard by Mrs. Szabo." I entered the small green garden , went around the villa and found a small house there.

An old woman opened the door for me with a kind, smiling face. She asked me how I found out about the room. I said I heard it from a friend. I rented the room.

There in that little house, I found a home for a short time.

When I entered ~~the house~~ I was surprised how lonely the old lady seemed.

Order and quiet. The bible on the table, with a rosary on top. Religious pictures on the walls, and a melancholic sadness which penetrated the rooms. I looked at the old woman and thought –"God brought me here to share this old woman's loneliness, to take care of her. I said I wanted to move in tomorrow. Mrs. Szabo looked up to heaven and said, "I thank God who sent you here to ease my loneliness. And then said in a more practical voice "the rent money will help me a little, too."

I felt I wanted to stay there in that kitchen which became now semi-dark in the early evening, and spent the evening quietly talking.

I dreaded the noise of the big city now, and thought of Aunt Ilonka's crowded apartment as something despicable. I said goodbye to everyone the following morning and left without leaving my new address.

I took a taxi which traveled slowly out of the city. At the city limit the taxi stopped, the driver said, "sorry I can't go any further." I have to leave you here". No matter what I said how I begged him, he put my suitcases out, turned around and left. In the distance I saw a gas station. I went there with my heavy suitcase and asked the attendant if I can leave it there for a little while.

While I was talking to him, the air raid sirens started to blow, loudly, sharply, urging one to drop everything and look for a safe place. From the surrounding houses I saw people emerge, and running toward an open meadow. I ran with them. Then I heard the noise of the planes, and I jumped in an old bomb crater, because I remembered hearing that bombs don't fall twice in the same place. But the deep hole was full of stinking garbage, I climbed out and ran further, when somebody grabbed me and pulled me into a bunker where 5-6 people were sitting. I fell on the bench and then I heard the loud whistle of a bomb. It fell very close to us. Somebody yelled "Keep you mouths open because you will lose your hearing otherwise." We were tossed around in the bunker like dolls. The dust was so thick you couldn't see. The women in the bunker, farmers wives who were working in the fields when the air raid started, were crying – this is the end. We will all die here like rats. Bomb followed bomb, they all fell around us. Every time we heard the whistle of a bomb, we were sure it is going to hit us.. In a short period of quiet, the people told me that around here, the bombings are often. It is an important rail road they bomb ~~here~~. ~~Then another wave came and nobody talked~~ It was hell.

When I emerged from the bunker, I was covered with dust. As I was walking back to the gas station I met some soldiers. They shouted to me – "now you are a soldier too."
When I reached the gas station, I find the attendant dead with terrible wounds. I find my suitcase where I left it, went to the nearest train station, in a short while I was at Mrs. Szabo's quiet kitchen where nothing changed since yesterday. I sat down, and stayed seated, motionless for a time..
The following day, I find work in a shop near a train station.
One Sunday afternoon I went to my mother-in-law's hoping for letters from my family, but there was nothing. At my mother-in-law's nothing has changed. Her rooms were an island of quiet.
You could forget what is going on outside, the quiet enveloped you with a feeling of false security. We drank tea with toast. I gave her the address of the salon in which I was working now and left.
I brought some pastry for old Mrs. Szabo. I knew that she was waiting for me in that quiet, lonely house and that when I will arrive she will smile at me, greet me, as if she would be my mother. I felt sorry for the old lady. I tried to act as if she was really family.
When we finished the pastry and sitting side by side, Mrs. Szabo started to talk.
She told me that she is a widow for ten years now, but that she wasn't always as alone as this. She had a daughter who spent all her free time with her. Never wanted to go out, just wanted to stay home, go to church and sometimes to a movie. They were very happy together this way.
But a co-worker of the pretty girl started to court her, and a short time later asked her to marry him. The girl told all this laughingly to her mother. She had no intentions to get married. But the mother talked her into, she thought that it would be too selfish to keep her daughter just for herself. So the girl got married at the age of twenty. Mrs. Szabo was very happy, because the new couple moved in with her. The husband was a loud, demanding man, but visibly he tried to restrain himself to be in harmony with his quiet, sweet wife. Soon the young woman was pregnant. She gave birth to a healthy boy, but died in childbirth. Mrs. Szabo's grief and pain was beyond measure. But somehow she found solace in her grandson. The man, who was only twenty-five soon got married again, and moved out. He of course took his little boy with him.

Mrs. Szabo went to see her grandson every day. The new wife didn't like this. There were unpleasant scenes. Mrs. Szabo cried, asked them to not do this to her but to no avail. First they restricted her visits to once a week, later they moved out of the city far away. So Mrs. Szabo remained alone with her sadness and her guilt.

I was listening to this tragedy, and so naturally I told her mine. I did not fear for a moment of her denouncing me. I was talking of my old life, my home, my interrupted life.

My mother is gone. I don't know where she is. Some people say they were killed. But that can't be true. I can't believe it. How can one imagine something like this. But if she is alive, why doesn't she write ? Maybe, maybe she is hungry, maybe she is cold. I can't do anything for her. The old woman was stroking my hair, I was crying very hard, and she was crying with me.

When I went to bed I cried again, and it became my habit from then on to cry myself to sleep at night.

During the day, when I was working, I was smiling, playing a carefree, happy go lucky person. Some evenings I went to the movies. One evening in the middle of the film, air raid was announced.

I was dozing off on the hard bench of the shelter, I heard, half asleep as a German soldier was telling his comrade, he wished this circus would be over and he could go home to his wife and little girl.

When we finally came up from the shelter, it was 2:00 AM. I sat in a dark train, standing at the station. Slowly the coach filled in. We were waiting in the dark for the tram to leave. Finally it dawned on us that the electricity was cut. People left the coach, only a few of us remained who lived too far to walk home. I said to myself in a low voice, "How on earth am I going to go home to Kispest ?" The young woman sitting beside me said, "I too live quite far in Buda." What's your name ?

"Elisabeth Kovacs, And your name ?"

"Klara Barinyak"

We started talking. The girl told me that she can't afford not to be able to sleep the whole night. She works in a very important office. She was afraid she will sleep on the job. I wanted to impress her and told her that I am working in a well known daily newspaper. This paper was sponsored by the Arrowcross and was of course virulently anti semitic.

Maybe she was impressed, because she invited me to sleep at her place tonight. It would take one hour walk to get to Buda. We started walking, the two of us, through the quiet, sleeping metropolis and were talking. I asked questions and she answered. She has nobody, she lives alone in a rented room. I was immediately suspicious. Maybe she is….. But when we arrived to her place, I saw that her landlady greeted her so warmly, she even asked us in her living room for coffee. After the long air raid nobody has gone to sleep, and there were a few people in the room, drinking, talking.

Everybody greeted Klara with warmth, but they were barely noticing me, until Klara told them where I was working. I was surrounded. They asked me if I know this, or that person who also works there. I was just shaking my head. They thought I was tired. We went to sleep. We just met, total strangers, slept in the same bed and somehow I got suspicious again.

In the morning, after showers, we were getting dressed, when I had an idea. I took out my husband's latest picture, where he was wearing a yellow arm band (this was what the Jewish forced labor men wore) and showed it to Klara.

"Who is this?"

"My fiance."

"You have a Jewish fiance?'

"Yes and we are very much in love."

So we came to a point when we just realized we are in the same situation. Laughingly we embraced. We had breakfast in a small café.

We became friends. A Sunday afternoon, we were taking a walk, when suddenly Klara said, "come Elisabeth. I take you to a nice family, good friends of mine."

We went to an elegant apartment house on Andrassy Avenue. A very pretty young girl, about 16, opened the door for us, and fell in the arms of Klara. In the room was a couple, and a little girl of about 10. Everybody kissed Klara and they seemed to be very happy to see her. Klara introduced me.

"This is Elisabeth, a Jewish girl."

I was flabbergasted. What was Klara doing introducing me like this.

"Oh, don't be afraid. This is my father, my mother and my two sisters."

As I found out later, after the German occupation the family disappeared from their town.

They all had Christian papers, all original documents. The Father, mother and the little girl had one name, but the two older girls had different names. So the 16 year old was living there as if she was renting a room. Klara couldn't do this because she looked too much like her mother. She had to go live elsewhere, and visit time to time. Not too often so it couldn't arise suspicion.

I felt a terrible pain, and a wish that time could be turned back, and my family could do the same as this one.

I never went back to that family, couldn't bear to see them, happy together, while I was all alone and worried sick about my loved ones.

One day I accidentally met the girl I lived with at Aunt Ilonka. She told me Misi almost cried when he came looking for me and I was gone, no one knew where. "That boy is crazy about you, was looking for you all over the city."

I felt nothing. I was 18, but my heart was frozen. It didn't respond.

I was working one month in the shop when one day a woman with the yellow star was looking for me. I recognized my mother-in-law's neighbor. My boss made an unhappy face, but let me go out to talk with her.

"What is it, what happened ?'

"Agnes, please don't get excited. I have to prepare you to see someone – your brother is here."

My legs almost gave under me., I was shaking.

"Where, where ? I want to see him immediately."

"He is waiting on the other side of the street."

I forced myself to be calm. Went in the shop, asked the afternoon off. I didn't say anything, I didn't lie. I just took off my uniform. Like a sleepwalker I went after the woman who took me to my brother.

There was, front of me, my brother. But this was not the boy I knew. This was a bald headed skinny man, with a tormented face. This was not the boy who collected stamps, read Jules Verne on the couch while eating huge slices of bread with jam. The person who stood in front of me was still 15, but in his eyes there was all the sadness of a grown man. He lost that brave keen look he had six months ago. When I looked in his eyes I thought "a broken mirror."

We embraced and I cried. We couldn't stand there. People were looking at us, me without the yellow star, they looked at my brother's arm with the yellow arm band. We were surrounded with enemies. We started to walk, hand in hand. Gyuri told me that his unit is traveling through Budapest, but it looks that their train might not leave for days. So he sneaked away to look for me. He went to my mother-in-law's and was surprised not to find me there.

I was tormented with the knowledge that just now I had no money. I couldn't buy anything for my brother.

I saw a jewelry store. I went in and sold my gold necklace. Now I had enough money. I bought bread, jam, sardines for my brother to take back with him. As we were walking side by side my brother said, "Agi, you so thin. You look like you could take a rest. Why do you live this way? The Jews in Budapest doesn't have it so bad. Why don't you go back to your mother in law?"

"Gyuri, you don't understand it. I can't live with the knowledge that my fate can be decided by people who have complete authority above me. I need to fight, I need to feel free. I can't live like

a caged animal, waiting for its fate.

"Okay, live as you want to . But now that I saw you so thin, worn out, I will be worried sick about you. You want to fight. How can you fight? You need strength to fight. You don't look to me strong enough to live this kind of life. Go back to your mother in law, Agi. Why can't you take the Jewish fate like the rest of us."

This last sentence of his hit me like a brick. Yes, I should take what comes, with my people, with the yellow star on my chest. Also, I had to agree with my brother that I was thinner, nervous, tired. Since I was living alone in a room, I had too much opportunity to cry. I lost a lot of weight. I promised my brother to move back to my mother-in-law, the latest, day after tomorrow. In my happiness to be with my brother, I didn't think that we may be stopped any minute, asking for my papers and then....but as I said I was too happy to think of danger.

Then I asked my brother the question I wanted to ask all along but was afraid to ask. "Have you heard anything from Mother ? You know people here say they killed them."

"Oh no, they were taken to the Island of Madagascar. They are alive. Don't worry."

Both of us knew the fate of our Mother can not be guessed. But my dear brother wanted to console me.

He had to go back to the rail road station to join his unit. I would give anything to not have to part with him. But parting we had to, and I looked a long time after the tall skinny boy disappeared. I thought will I ever see my brother again.? I wanted to cry but I couldn't. I thought I will cry at night in my bed alone.

VI

I kept my promise to my brother and moved back to my mother-in-law's. She received me warmly. It was hard to say goodbye to Mrs. Szabo, knowing how alone she will be after I am gone.

When I went back to the shop after I parted with my brother, the boss took me aside and asked, "Are you Jewish?"

I didn't even try to deny it. I was tired, too tired to play the role. I simply said, "Yes." He said, "Well, you can't work here and I will keep your working permit which is fake anyway. Go immediately."

So here I was again in the quietness of my mother –in-law's apartment, I wanted to rest, to sleep. I didn't want to think. The days passed uneventfully, I let my body and mind relax. I didn't have to play a role, I could be me. A Jewish woman who has the right to sit in a corner, with a sad face. We had a Christian neighbor with whom we were friendly. I went there sometimes to listen to the radio. One afternoon we were listening to some sweet music when suddenly the program stopped

and Miklos Horthy Hungary's leader was speaking.

"We lost the war," he started. He said that Hungary will no longer collaborate with the Germans.

We listened to every word with incredible pleasure. Could it be that our suffering is over?

It was great joy in the house. The Jews tore off the yellow stars from their clothing we went out to the streets to look in the eyes of the people who spat on us, who ~~made~~ tormented us.

But the whole thing only lasted an afternoon. In the evening the radio announcedment that Ferenc Szalasy the leader of the Arrow Cross movement took over the government and that the Hungarian army will fight with the Germans until the final victory. The Jews should sew back the yellow stars on their clothing and the doors of the Jewish occupied buildings should be locked.

We knew if the arrow cross is now the government our fate is sealed. We are dead. I didn't sleep all night. I felt I am in a trap. I didn't want to die. I wanted to be free again, out there – not in here closed in waiting for the axe to fall.

Budapest was quiet and dark. A new horror had started now. It surely will surpass the previous one.

The following day the doors of the building were locked. We were not allowed out. The radio said that Jews who will be caught with forged papers on the streets will be shot. I thought "My God, how important we Jews are and how dangerous. The new government seemed to be occupied foremost with us. Suddenly I felt I would take the chance to be shot if found on the street, than being closed in here. I decided to leave. I had to get out of the building somehow.

When I told of my decision, my relatives were aghast. They (my mother in law and two sisters in law) told me so many valid reasons why I shouldn't leave, that I started to believe that maybe they are right. I wanted to be alone. Sitting in my room, I was thinking about what I should do. Suddenly I thought of my mother. I felt that my mother could tell me what to do. I went to my desk, took out the prayer book my Mother gave me, held it in my hand, my eyes closed. I thought send me a message, Mother, tell me what I should do. I slowly let the book open and I read the following. "A mother's prayer for her sick daughter…and my daughter who was so brave is now hesitating. "2

Next day, when the Jewish buildings were permitted to open – for one hour – I left the house with a bag full of clothes.

I had one hope, to look for Klara, maybe she will set me up for a few days. I had no money and I had no working permit, and I could be shot on the street like a mad dog.

But I took a deep breathe and felt almost happy.

I telephoned Klara, she was very nice. She couldn't talk long, she was very busy at work. She asked me to go to her friends on the Andrassy Avenue at 6 PM.

I walked the streets all day long. I got hungry, but I had absolutely no money. I was dizzy from hunger, when I arrived to Klara's parents' apartment. I tried to converse with the family, but my brain send me one message only, eat, eat. I think they became aware of my hunger and gave me bread with butter and a cup of coffee. Never had I tasted such good food. Then Klara arrived. We kissed. Klara said I did the right thing to have escaped from the Jewish house. But to find a place for me to sleep she couldn't.

"Couldn't I sleep at your place ?"

"No, I am sorry but you know my landlady might find it suspicious."

"Could I sleep here? I can sleep on this chair. For just this one night. Please?"

"My dear child, how can you ask such a thing. We are so closely observed here. There can be trouble."

They didn't want to help.

Then a visitor came a young girl about 17, a friend of the family. When she heard of my problems, she said, "you can sleep with me. We will have to sleep in the same bed, and I must tell you I live in squalor. You'll see." I was relieved and happy.

We left the avenue and entered a dark alley. She stopped in front of the dirtiest tenement and knocked on a door in the basement. An ill kept toothless old woman opened the door and was not the least bit surprised that the girl who only rented a bed brought home company. Her grey deep set eyes just looked at me asking no questions.

In the so-called kitchen three men snored. In the room were three beds. In one of them slept maybe an even dirtier old woman and in the other bed was a woman sleeping, her thin face looked about 40. Her long black hair mixed with grey was covering the dirty pillow. The third bed belonged to my new friend. The old woman who opened the door for us slept with the other witch like oldster. In my friend's bed, the linens didn't look too disgusting. I have never seen such squalor.

The young girl told me that she escaped from the ghetto.

When I woke up, the filth, the horrible smells, chaotic conditions greeted me. I quickly got up wondering where to wash – but decided not to wash I was in a big hurry to leave.

It was raining. I was standing at the door - where to ?

I started walking toward the avenue to look in the little news stands where there always are ads for rooms to rent.

I find one. You could hardly call it a room. It must have been a kitchen before it was promoted. It was also very expensive. I took it.

The landlady said, "you can't receive any visitors here, not even women. Do you have bed

linens? I don't supply bed linens. I ask two weeks rent in advance."

I agreed to everything, but had no idea how I will get my bed linens from the Jewish house. The super would let me in, but wouldn't let me out. This is for sure.

I laid down on the bed. The mattress was an old fashioned one, filled with straw. There was one chair, an old wardrobe and a sink in the room. It wasn't much. I slept all day. I didn't eat, but wasn't hungry.

In the evening, I walked to my mother in law's street. I had a plan. I will ask a person on the street, who looks like a kind person to go in the Jewish house and bring out what I asked for in a short letter I'd written asking for my bed linen and a little money if they could spare it. I realized that a man will sooner do such a favor to a woman than another woman would.

I stood on a corner but was afraid to ask anyone. People were hurrying all around me, bumping into me, some looked at me quizzingly . The minutes passed. I thought how complicated life had gotten. I can't go into that building if I want to stay free. So much energy to waste on so simple an enterprise.

Suddenly I thought of my life at home long ago. I would be now sitting in front of my piano practicing. We would be served coffee. My mother would be knitting under the lamp.

I have no home anymore. Strangers live in our old apartment, a different mother is knitting under the lamp and who is playing my piano?

Suddenly a tall well dressed man stopped in front of me.

"What's the matter young lady? Why are you standing here, so deep in thought?"

"Oh, nothing only – I have to get a package out of this Jewish-house. They will give it if you show this letter. Would you?"

"Of course I will. You are Jewish?'

"No. I am not Jewish."

I showed him the building, he went in and returned with the packages. I said my thanks, shook hands with him and never saw this angel of a stranger who with no fuss no questions asked did what I asked him.

My clean neat bed linen made a good impression on my landlady. In the other small package they sent me bread and a small piece of meat and 100 Pengo.

I started to eat immediately, thinking of my mother in law with gratitude. She knew I must be hungry.

Next day I was looking for work. True, I had no working permit, but for two weeks into a new job, you don't have to show it. Two weeks is a long time. A lot can happen in two weeks.

I found work in a small shop nearby. After the week the boss asked for my work permit. I gave

her some excuse why I can't show it.

One day by accident the Arrowcross people blew up the Margit bridge. Trams full of people, horse drawn carriages, pedestrians, fell into the Danube river to their death.

"The front is not far away", I thought, but what the significance of that fact meant, I didn't know.

One of my customers, a young war widow, Mrs. Szilagyi, who really liked me when I told her what a

primitive room I lived in, she promised that she will take me in when the Jewish apartment she was to get will be hers.

In the shop, the boss slowly made peace with the fact that I lost my work permit and will get a new one shortly.

My landlady marveled how I was able to wash myself head to toe, in cold water. I had no hot water and she never offered me some. The straw in my mattress was hard. There were curious little bugs in them. Sometimes, they showed up, sometimes I didn't see them for days. I got used to my room and liked that it was so quiet.

When I was walking home on the avenue, I saw couples arm in arm, mothers and daughters, girlfriends walking together, laughing, joking, seemingly with not a care in the world. I was always alone. I didn't seek out people. I didn't phone Klara, didn't go to Kispest to visit Mrs. Szabo. I forgot them, as if they never existed. I felt good in this quiet isolation.

But about this time I thought I was getting sick. I didn't feel pain anywhere. I just felt a great tiredness. I just wanted to lay in bed for days. I wanted to be myself to show the world what hurts and why. But I couldn't. I had to stay in the role of Elisabeth Kovacs who wasn't too intelligent, laughed easily and who suffered no pain. I had to give manicures to German soldiers, had to listen to their compliments and smile, always smile. I was afraid to show my sorrow, even in my room alone. I was afraid to get out of the role even when alone.

One morning I felt I can't go on. All the hidden emotions, fear, grief, worry had wrecked my nerves. I felt I was near a nervous collapse. To rest, to rest. This was all I wanted. I thought why couldn't I go in a hospital? Elisabeth Kovacs, a Christian, had the right to be sick and lay in a hospital bed.

I didn't go to work that morning. I went to a nearby hospital which was in the middle of a big garden. I was told to go to the manager's office.

When I entered the big room, I found a very nice looking man there, about thirty, who asked me to sit down. As soon as I sat down, the air raid sirens started. He said that if I am not afraid we can stay in the office, he never goes to the shelter.

"No, I am not afraid. Please let's stay here. I want to tell you something. I need advice."

I don't know what made me decide to tell all to this man I never knew before. "I have to tell

everything. Maybe he belongs to the Arrowcross. I don't care. I have t tell him about the suffering they cause," I thought.

We were all alone in the building. Everybody from all the offices went to the shelter. It was very quiet. The bombers must have been working above Kispest.

I talked. And as I talked tears started flowing from my eyes.

"I was so happy, so secure. I had such a wonderful life. And now I am all alone. Everybody was taken from me. I feel sick and weak. I hope you don't hate me for being Jewish. I went through so much. I saw my brother so thin, his head shaven. Maybe he is dead already. I can't play the role anymore. I want to come here, please admit me in the hospital. I am sick. I want to just lay quietyl in bed for a week."

The man listened to me. His face didn't move a muscle. Then he said., "Little girl, you are not sick. You don't need to be in hospital. You are very tired and very lonely. You need a good friend on whom you can depend. Please don't take it the wrong way, when I offer my friendship. I am interested in your fate and I want to be of help. You can spend your evenings in my home. I have a good radio, lots of books, no one will bother you there. You can ignore me there.."

I understood that he was right. The next night I went to the address he gave me. It was a very well furnished home of a middle class person. In my monastic room, I forgot about homes with deep armchairs, Persian rugs, paintings on walls and soft music from the radio. My landlady's apartment was furnished very nicely but she never invited me in. Nights, when I went home, I had to ring the doorbell (she never gave me a key) my landlady opened the door for me and quickly ran back from the cold, dark hallway into their well heated rooms where her husband sat by the stove eating baked potatoes. Every night I had the glimpse of a warm home, but I had to go in my cold room where to seek warmth I had to go to bed and stay there.

But now I was here, in this friendly home, where the central heating created just the right temperature. My new friend put a box of cookies in front of me. I was hungry, I was always hungry. The food I eat in restaurant was now consisting mainly of cabbage soup. Food got very scarce in Budapest. I wanted to put the cookies in my mouth with both fists, but I controlled myself.

I saw the picture of a woman and two children on the table.

"My wife and my sons. They are in the country now."

I wanted to see everything in the apartment. When I got to the bathroom I thought "Oh my God. A bathtub.. Warm water."

When he saw the way I looked at it he said, "take a bath."

When I was sitting in the warm water up to my neck I thought, "life can be so wonderful."

After the bath, I was like a new person.

We sat in the living room, drank cognac and talked. He told me he had married at twenty-one . He still loves his wife and never cheated on her until now, if I was willing. I could see that although he wanted me he was afraid and maybe relieved when I said no. I told him I was married, too, and I don't cheat on my husband either. Having established that, we could talk of other things.

"What do you think about the Jews?"

"Well, I have to confess, I don't like them. I couldn't tell you why. Maybe because I grew up with the propaganda against the Jews. But eye to eye, I feel they are human, just like us. Besides, if I see somebody who needs my help, as I have seen it in you, I would never deny it. "

We talked about various things for a long time. When I went home I didn't feel the cold, I didn't feel lonely.

I spent many nights in that apartment with my friend. Those were good times until one Sunday afternoon, a young woman opened the door for me. I recognized the woman in the picture. The lady of the house.

"Who are you looking for?"

"Oh, it's a mistake, excuse me" and I left quickly. I was walking the streets again. I lost my paradise, I lost the illusion of home. Once again my heart longed for my lost home, my real home. Many times I missed my mother. Not for her to take care of me, I liked my independence, my freedom. I longed for her presence, for her smile, sweet face. Dear God. It has been such a long time since I saw her. Five months. I have never been away for her this long. When I remembered her, standing behind a chair, her hands grasping the back of the chair tightly. She wanted to be strong. She didn't want to cry. When I thought of this I felt such pain in my heart, I didn't know it then, that this deep pain in my heart will never go away. The intensity of the pain will never lessen, will even increase with the years. I didn't know it then, what happened with my mother. I believed that one day everybody I love, will come back and I will have no pain in my heart.

Days passed. One evening I was eating alone in a restaurant. I ate cabbage soup again because when the waiter asked me for the ration coupons which I couldn't obtain, I had to say I hadn't any. Across from me at a table sat a young man with the arrowcross band on his arm. He kept looking at me. When I left the restaurant, he followed me out and stopped me.

"You are Jewish. No use denying it . You have to come with me. Don't be afraid, I am not taking you to Avenue Andrassy, no. 60. I am taking you home with me."

We traveled on a train a long time. Arrived to some outer borough with small bungalow style houses.

I don't remember one word exchanged with the man. I was completely submissive. In his room I remember only that we went to bed and that after he made love to me he cried. I didn't cry.

In the morning he took me back and he ordered me to show him where I lived. Then left but not before giving me a little sum of money. All this didn't bother me. I was happy for the money. He came back a few times, always late at night, taking me back to his place, until I moved away.

One day I saw an announcement on the walls of the city.

"Every Jewish woman, ages 16-50 have to present themselves for war related work in Germany."

I thought maybe in Germany I will find my mother. First I thought this highly improbable. But the more I thought about it the more possible it seemed. I decided to enlist.

I asked for two days off from work. I don't know why, but I didn't want to burn all the bridges behind me. I told my landlady I will go visiting for two days. I took a snapshot of my mother and the last postcard I got from my husband and went to my mother in law's. There I got a backpack from someone, put in a few clothes , a blanket and some food. I was almost happy to go like for an interesting journey. I took a bath in the evening and when I was in my bed I thought, "who knows when I will lie in a bed again."

In the morning there was great movement in the house. All the young women had to leave. "Take care of yourself, loads of good byes, a last kiss, last embrace, a last look back to the home and everybody started to march away. Some of us young, not leaving anyone behind, some with heavy hearts, with tears in the eyes, many women had to leave their children behind, sometimes asking a stranger to take care of them. We had to go.

It was seven in the morning when I left. The backpack was very heavy, and after ten minutes walking, I was tired. We had far to go to the Kisok sports arena, which was way out of the city. People looked at us with sympathy as the young women marched from everywhere to concentrate on that sports arena.

There were young mothers who had no place to leave their babies, they marched pushing baby carriages, or holding the hand of small children.

Many people stood and watched this curious spectacle , some said, "don't go . Don't' obey." But the Jewish women just smiled. They knew that the doors of the Jewish houses were now locked and that this is the only road for them now. It seemed a very long time, but finally I arrived there. A mob of women was standing in the empty arena. I stayed up front. I wanted to leave with the first group. But nothing happened. We just stood there. Four hours passed. I was very tired. Around me, strangers. One woman took out her knitting and started to knit standing there. I wanted to sit down on the earth, but the arrowcross guard didn't let me. Suddenly, an officer went through the crowd and some time later the loud speaker said that women with children should

stand apart forming another group. Later the loud speaker said, wives of forced labor men should step aside.

I left my group and joined the other. Hours passed. My strength left me entirely. When I thought of the fact that tomorrow, the day after and who knows for how long, I will have to live in a crowd without the least creature comfort, being just one nameless, almost faceless number in the throng, I thought I shan't be able to bear it.

"My mother lives like this. I have to take it."

Rain started to fall. We huddled together. We stood on a little higher ground. I watched as the units left, one after the other. Some groups were singing as they marched. Beside me were the mothers with their children. Some were breast feeding their babies standing in the rain. Others had fed their children with what they brought with them. The children were crying and wanted to go home. I wanted to cry out, seeing so much misery – it can't be allowed that children should stand in rain and that the breast of the mothers should get wet when feeding their babies. I was thinking longingly of my lonely room now, oh, if once again I could lay there alone quietly. It seemed the highest of folly to have come to this place voluntarily to be a slave. I realized now that I would never find my mother in situations like this. I wished with all my heart to get out of there. But there was no sign that my wish will be granted. Newly formed units kept marching away endlessly the whole day long. Children were crying, we were standing there our garments now wet, clinging to our bodies. The arrowcross guards pointed out this and that woman. They were laughing. They had a good time.

It got dark. Suddenly an announcement on the loudspeaker –"Mothers with children and wives of forced labor workers can go home."

When I was in the other side of the barbed wires, I felt elated. I can go home. I am free. I went in a church, sat down and thanked God for my freedom. I caused some curiosity because of the yellow star on my chest, but I didn't care. I was too happy to care.

I sat there for a while and when I felt my nerves quiet down a little , I left.

VII

There was again in the beauty shop Elisabeth Kovacs, the pretty brunette. She gave manicures to S. S. soldiers, created pretty hair dos for her customers and she was always smiling.

My boss told me if I don't produce a working permit we both can be in trouble. So I went to City Hall into the proper office and announced that I lost my working permit. The woman at the desk opened a drawer and put a bunch of working permits in front of me. "Look through them, maybe you find yours." This is just what I was hoping for. I pretended to look through them, but in the first unguarded moment, I slipped one into my pocket. "I didn't find mine. I will come back in a

few days later and apply for a new one." (Sure, I didn't have the necessary papers, of course.) When I was walking out, I put my hand in my pocket and was happy to feel the little book nestling there. All I had to do is to take out the existing name on it (with a special solution I got from Laszlo and Istvan a long time ago.) But I couldn't show this book to my boss, because I told her I only worked in two salons before and this book had twelve salons listed. I had to look for a new place. I easily found one, two blocks away.. But already the next day one of the girls said, "Look, the new girl has black hair, black eyes, a big nose. She could pass for a Jew." I was laughing it off, as if it was such improbability, it can't be taken seriously. Not far from the salon was a big hotel which was taken over entirely for the German soldiers. They lived there and ate in the big restaurant which was now theirs only. All the serving girls came to our beauty shop. One of them took a liking to me. She kept urging me,

"What are you doing working in a beauty salon for such low pay. Come, be a waitress in our restaurant, the tips are tremendous, the food is so good – white bread, meat. You can eat as much as you like. Handsome soldiers – what are you waiting for? They are always looking to hire pretty young waitresses."

The other girls were keenly observing me and wanted to hear what I will say.

"Okay, I will be there tomorrow morning."

I could see the girls lost interest. They decided I can't be Jewish if I am ready to go there working for the Germans.

Later in my bed I was thinking that I don't want to work in that salon. I didn't like the co-workers. I decided to look for another job. Then I got to thinking. Why couldn't I really go and work for the Germans? What I was thinking of was the good food the girl said I will be eating there. I decided, since I had that date with the girl tomorrow morning, I might as well go and look at the place.

The hotel was swarming with German soldiers. The girl took me to the hiring office and left me by the door. When I entered, I found an elegantly furnished room with a big desk, behind which sat a middle aged woman. She let me stand there a while and I was looking at the pictures on her desk. She followed my gaze and pointed to the photograph –"my daughter" and smiled at the photo with motherly pride and love. I felt such hatred for this woman. "Yes, this is your daughter. I am somebody's daughter also. What did you do with my mother ?" I wanted to strangle her. But I just stood there, listening to the rules and regulations of the place, said that I will have to think it over. I knew then, that I hate the Germans too much to be able to work for them.

I found work in a shop where there was only the boss working. He was happy to hire me immediately. He said he will leave me alone in the shop and come in in the evening, because he

was recruited for some civil service, war related work.

The shop was further away from my home than the others. It wasn't pleasant to go home in the cold evenings through the darkened streets walking alone. But I was happy in the shop. The boss bought lots of coal and I packed the little stove until it was real warm in there. The customers came but not too many. So I had time to think, read, make notes in my little notebook. Lunch time I always took a walk to the nearby Vadasz Street where the Swedish consulate was. A long line of Jews were waiting in front of it waiting for something, I didn't know what. I had that faint hope that maybe among the many Jews I will find a face I know. But I never did.

So passed a few weeks. I was always hungry. One day while working I got dizzy and had to sit down. The customer had an inkling as to what the problem might be because she came back later with tea and toast.

One day at lunch again I was walking toward Vadasz Street. It was an unseasonably cold October day. As usual, a long line of Jews with the yellow star on their breast were standing in front of the embassy and looked at me with an empty, tired look. I walked by twice and was about to go back to the shop when a boy , about sixteen stepped out from the line and addressed me as "Agnes- you are Agnes." "But how do you know my name?"

'I went to school with your brother. But this is not important. The important thing is that if you want to see your brother alive, for the last time, go out to Ferencvaros railroad station. He is there with his unit on a train to be sent to Germany. I ran away and I am not going back."

My mind couldn't absorb this for a moment. My brother is here. My brother is in danger. I said good bye and ran back to the salon.

It was Saturday and three customers were waiting for me. I said to the boss, "Sorry, but I have to leave immediately. My fiancee is going to the front. This will be our last afternoon."

"No, you can't leave on a Saturday afternoon. You have customers waiting."

"I have to leave. I don't care."

"Go then, but I will not pay you for the whole week."

One woman said, " Oh, please, just comb my hair our, it will take you only ten minutes."

It took all my will power to comb her complicated hairdo. I wanted so to rush off.

Finally, I was on the street. I was shaking from nervousness and anticipation. I have to buy him something. In one of the stores I bought a box of waffles. Nothing else was available. I put the box under my arm and ran to the train station. After a long time I arrived to Ferencvaros railroad station. It was almost dark. I could hear the Russian canons. The front was not too far away from there. The wind blew. Suddenly it has gotten pitch dark, no light, nowhere a person. I was

walking on the platform of the station when I heard voices from behind a door. I opened the door. The room was full of German soldiers and Hungarian railroad men. They had lights on, but the windows had the blue papers on which let no light escape.

"What can I do for you?" asked a railroad man. Thirty pairs of inquisitive eyes were looking at me.

"I have heard that you have Jewish forced labour units here. My boss's son is among them. I would want to talk with him. My boss was very good to me."

" This is totally out of the question. You can't talk to the prisoners."

I was again on the dark platform. Where should I look for him. How can I find him?"

Suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder. The railroad man I was talking to whispered in my ear.

"Go all the way to the end of the station. There on the third rail is the train. Hurry up. Don't linger. Leave as soon as you finished."

He didn't wait a second longer – disappeared in the darkness before I could have thanked him.

I walked a long way when I saw some small lights moving. I went toward it. I walked into puddles, stumbled several times. I felt that the box I had under my arm is empty. In my great agitation I squeezed the box and all the waffles must have fallen out one by one. I stopped. Looked into the empty box. I am not bringing him anything. This hurt me. I walked ahead.

Finally I was reaching the lights, heard voices.. I stopped in front of one of the wagons and suddenly recognized Pista, a boy I knew from school. He looked at me as if I were a ghost.

"Agnes, how on earth you got here.? How did you know we are here?'

"Pista, where is Gyuri?"

"He is in the wagon we are standing in front of ."

"Call him."

"Gyuri, come out. Your sister is here."

I heard my brother's voice from the wagon.

"Leave me alone with your stupid jokes. I am sleeping."

"No, no, it is no joke. She is standing right here. Come."

No answer. Then I said softly, "Gyuri."

The next minute we were in each other's arms. The minute I held my brother in my arms, saw his skinny face, big eyes shining like he had a fever, trembling. I decided I take him with me. Where to ? I didn't know and didn't care. I only felt I will not let this pale child be taken away – will not let him even if I have to pay for it with my life.

"Gyuri, you are coming with me. Don't be afraid everything is arranged. Don't say goodbye to anyone, don't look back, just walk with me."

"But Agnes, I have my backpack there with a pair of boots, some bread in it. I have to..."

"You don't need it. Now its nobody around. Five minutes later may be too late.

We walked unhurriedly as if we were just walking, talking.

"Do you have any photos, or documents?'

"Yes."

"Throw them away."

He took out a bunch of dirty papers from his pocket, some photos and threw it away. We started to walk faster. I looked at my brother. He was dressed like a homeless person. Old boots, pants with holes, a pullover that must have been maroon some time ago, but now an unidentifiable color, and an overcoat. We didn't talk. We walked very fast now. We almost reached the entrance to the station, when I noticed two Hungarian soldiers standing there on patrol. I didn't see anybody when I walked in, so short while ago. There was no time for hesitation.

Don't worry, Gyuri. Everything is going to be all right. Don't speak. Just watch me and please don't tremble for God sakes.

When we reached the entrance, the two soldiers saluted me. I was well dressed and I guess I looked like somebody worth saluting. I nodded my head to them, and walked right through the gate, behind me the boy with the appearance well of a forced labor worker. As we passed the gate, I turned back, smiled at them and asked the time.

They smiled back, told me the time, saluted again and we were out on the empty wide avenue.

"Let's run, Gyuri."

We took each other's hand and ran, ran, directly to the next tram station.

VIII.

We couldn't talk to each other on the tram. We just sat side by side. Time to time I turned to Gyuri, "will you be able to carry those heavy furnitures."

"Oh, yes, my lady. I am strong."

So we established the fact that I am moving and this man will help me move. I was elated. I pulled it off. He is with me and we will not part again. I was not thinking of the next step, where will I put this boy now.

Finally we arrived to the shop. On the dark side street I could put my arm around my brother.

"Don't worry. It will be good. We are together. I will go get my money from the shop. Wait for me here in this dark corner."

"Okay, Agnes. You seem to know what you are doing. But how did you find me? I am happy you didn't keep your promise to me to live as a Jew, after Ferenc Szalasi came to rule."

"I will tell you everything, but we haven't got time now for it. Wait for me here. I will be back in

ten minutes. Don't move.

The boss was sweeping the floor of the shop.

"Hi, boss. I came for my money."

"What money ? I told you I will not pay you because you left me in that jam. Ten customers were looking for you."

"Nothing doing, I worked for that money. I will sue you. You can take today off but you still owe me the rest of it."

"No, I will not give you a penny. Go and sue me if you want to."

I realized that I will never get my money out of him this way. I desperately needed this money. I knew my brother was hungry and I had only some change left in my purse.

I knew it for weeks now that he took a fancy to me. He was a small man, bowlegged with a ruddy face. Many times he hinted to me that he thinks now it would be time for him to get married, with a pretty hairdresser – "just like you, Elisabeth."

I turned to him, looked at him in the eye and said," You want me to leave you now, when my fiancee departed for the front and I am free."

"You mean you two broke up ?"

"Yes"

"Okay, here is your money."

I was counting my money when my brother's terror stricken pale face looked in the door. He couldn't utter a word before my boss yelled at him.

"Out. Out. What do you want here ?"

Gyuri withdrew from the door like a stray dog who was kicked.

I left the shop after a few more encouraging words to my boss. I found my brother on the corner pulling his thin, worn overcoat closer on his neck to create some warm in the chilly night.

I made my brother believe that I have a plan that I went to the Ferencvaros station to get him out, that I have lots of places to hide him in. But of course. I hadn't the slightest idea where I can put him that very night. The thought that it is not only this night I have to worry about, but all the nights and days to come, frightened me. Also, I will have to find some decent clothes for him.

From where ?

I looked at his sweet face, trustingly walking beside me and I thought I will take care of him. I turned to him smiling.

"You will see how everything will turn out to be all right. The main thing is that you are off that train. The rest will be a struggle, but we will struggle together."

He was smiling and seemed happy.

I thought I will take him to Klara's parents, on Avenue Andrassy. Maybe just maybe they will let him sleep there tonight. Luckily they were home. But they would not allow "an escaped forced labor" person to stay there.

"Please, at least let him wash."

"Oh sure. Why not. There is the bathroom."

I was watching him wash. I could see that he was out of the habit of washing.

"You wash like a cat" I said smilingly, but the smile died on my face when I noticed a gaping wound on one of his fingers.

"Give me your hand. I have to bandage this wound. How did you get it anyway?"

He kept insisting that his finger doesn't hurt and needs no attention. He got the wound when he put his hand through the window of the wagon wanting to pull himself up to look out when a Russian plane flying low shot at the wagons with a machine gun. The bullet did not penetrate into the flesh, but it was a neglected, ugly wound, and I bandaged it with my handkerchief. All this time I racked my brain for a place I could take him to sleep. Suddenly I thought of Misi. My long lost friend. He will help. We said good bye to Klara's parents, after I asked and they refused to give my brother some clothes, and we left. We walked holding on to each other in the dark lobby of the house. It was so dark we had to search every new step with our feet on the staircases. Our existence was as dark, insecure, dangerous and bleak as this strange lobby. We were forced out of the world and was condemned to death. We were full of love for each other, so we didn't feel the threatening, cruel, cold world surrounding us. I was thinking I will save him, yes, I will. I felt happy that I can do something with my otherwise, I felt, useless life.

It was after eight when we reached Misi's house. Gyuri was sleepy and tired.

Misi's landlady said that he had moved. I was speechless for a moment.

"Where to ?"

Over there to the apartment at the end of the corridor."

Immense relief. He could have moved anywhere.

A nice lady opened the door for me saying that Misi is not home. He is giving a farewell party in a restaurant because he is leaving for the front tomorrow.

I was again on the street with my brother. But I knew where to look for Misi. I sat my brother down in the lobby of a movie house and went to the restaurant Misi and I frequented. He was there. He sat by a table drinking wine with a couple, and talked quietly. When I went to the table, I stood there looking at him with his blond hair falling on his forehead. He looked up and our eyes locked. We didn't talk. I thought now everything depends on his feelings for me. If he still cares for me, maybe I can ask him this big favor.

But his eyes didn't look at me with that wild fiery passion that used to frighten me so. His eyes were looking at me with sympathy , interest and friendship.

"Elisabeth, what good wind had brought you here?" Sit down. Tell me what happened to you in all those months I since I saw you. You grew taller – I swear little girl. Do you still have that little red hat? Come, have some wine, have a little fun. Relax."

"Misi, I didn't come here tonight to have a good time. I have to talk to you about a very serious matter. Please come out with me for a moment."

When we were standing on the dark street, my voice quivered as I asked him.

"Misi, I took my brother off a train which was destined for Germany. I have no place for him to sleep. He is fifteen years old, tired, bewildered. Please let him sleep in your room tonight."

"Elisabeth, how can you ask me this ? I am a soldier in the Hungarian army."

"Yes, you are a soldier, but you are also a human being. Don't refuse me. For God sake do this for me. I have no where else to turn. If I can't find a place for him , I will stay out on the street with him and both of us could be picked up – arrested."

"Why don't you take him with you in your room ?"

"My landlady would not let him in. She monitors my room, I couldn't do it. She told me absolutely no visitors and I know she means it.

"Okay, I will write a note to my landlady to let him in. But I have to leave at 5 o'clock in the morning. I am going to the front, then he will have to leave too. He can't stay in my room alone one moment. I wouldn't risk that. "

"Okay, I will be there and take him away."

"I have another condition. Come back to the restaurant, spend this evening with me. I might die tomorrow."

"Of course I will come back."

And so it happened that I could put this tired, sleepy child to bed finally. He stretched happily on Misi's bed and said, "You know Agnes, I haven't slept in a bed for four months now."

"I will be back at dawn for you."

In the restaurant I find Misi in a good mood. He was singing. He pulled me close to him.

It was 10:30 when we left the restaurant.

In the dark street Misi took my hand and said, "Elisabeth, you hurt me very much when you left me without saying good by. I wanted to find you so desperately. I felt my life so empty without you. I walked the streets looking for that girl in a grey suit, red hat, black hair who appeared in my life so suddenly and whom I lost so suddenly. Now I understand that you are right, I harassed you with my love. I was looking for you a long time. And then one day I felt that I healed. I am no longer in love with you, Elisabeth. Look, I will let you go without even asking for a kiss. But I want to thank you for the love I had for you. It was a first time in my life that I loved and suffered for a woman."

As I was listening to him my heart was full with sympathy and warmth for him, too bad I couldn't love him.

Maybe if my life wouldn't have been so complicated, so painful.....but now, good night.

Misi looked after me a long time as I disappeared in the night.

"She is so small, and she is so alone. What do they want from her ? Why are they after her? I am sure they killed her mother."

He went up to his room to find a strange boy in his bed. "This is her brother," he thought and looked at the sleeping boy's face. He awakened

"Don't be afraid. It is me, Misi. Pretty soon all will be well, the Russians will be here soon."

Then they slept in that bed, the blond Hungarian and the dark haired Jew. Their breath mixed, the well washed body of Misi touched the body of the boy who was not washed properly for six months. They didn't try to keep away from each other. There in that small room, it was peace.

I had no alarm clock. To be sure not to miss the time I have to go back for Gyuri I decided not to sleep the whole night. I lay down on the bed fully dressed. I was looking at my few photos, was reading my notes and looking at my watch every five minutes. Time didn't seem to move. I was terribly sleepy but was afraid to let myself sleep, if I am not there to meet that child, he might panic.

I sat up in bed, but my eyes kept closing. It was terribly hard to stay awake. I turned the light off, only my wristwatch gave out a little light, with the fluorescent numbers on its face. This watch was like a living creature for me there in that quiet night. It was the only thing I had at this moment to keep me company. Suddenly I fell asleep. I couldn't fight it

any more. It hit me as if I was passing out. I woke up it was 4:45. I ran as fast as I could to Misi's house. I met a few whores and soldiers who had to join their units at dawn, otherwise the streets were empty. I saw a shadow by the wall – it was my brother.

"I was so afraid that you will not come."

"It is so good to have you with me."

Where to go ?

I remembered a building I visited once which had nice, warm, dry hallways. We can spend a few hours there I thought.

Cold wind blew. We walked like we haven't got a care in the world. Walked by arrowcross policemen without batting an eye.

We found the house. Walked up to the second floor. There was carpet on the floor. We sat down, me on a trashcan, my brother on the floor. We were talking. Talking about the lost home, the lost paradise. We remembered nice memories which not too long ago were realities. Like warmth, love, food, security. Then we slept. When we woke up, it was daylight. My watch showed seven o'clock. The corridor was still empty. We were not discovered.

"Let's go eat something."

Being Sunday, I could spend all day with my brother. First we went to a Christian family

– whose address I couldn't remember last night. They once were a friend of my mother's.
–
– When they saw us at the door, they panicked. But they helped.

First I asked if my brother can wash.

"Agnes, as soon as we enter somebody's apartment you want to wash me," said my brother smilingly.

I thought my brother always dirty after he spent the last six months in filth. I wanted to scrub him clean. These good people gave him a pair of pants and a shirt. I cut his hair with a kitchen scissors, looked him over and found him greatly improved. These people even promised to let Gyuri sleep there that night.

"No, don't thank us. Naturally, we want to help. We were friends of your parents, weren't we ?"

On the street, we flowed with the weekend crowd. I was thinking about the problems of every day life, how will I be able to fit my brother in, where could I hide him – to save

him. But I chased away those heavy thoughts. The sun was shining, the sky was blue and the boy had a place to sleep tonight. Tomorrow? It is ridiculous to think of tomorrow. We could be arrested any moment. We went in a café, I ordered coffee and bread with butter. I was happy to see how my brother enjoyed the food.

Then we went to a movie, They were showing a newsreel, German soldiers were marching, German tanks were traveling in a long row, and my brother who went through so much in the past twenty four hours started to tremble. He was terror stricken all of a sudden.

"Agnes, please let me go back to my unit. I can't do this, I have this terrible fear of being arrested. You alone could maybe talk your way out of it, with me alongside you, me, a male, my body is marked. I can never deny being a Jew. I will cause you a terrible misfortune. My sweet sister, please let me go back. I can't take this feeling of constant danger, lurking on every street, everywhere. I am not made for this. Believe me."

He was trembling and his teeth were chattering. I was speechless. I didn't know what to do or say. Then I knew.

"No. You can't go back. You are staying with me. If you leave me I will jump in front of the tram. Either we survive together or we will die together."

Slowly, slowly my brother regained his composure and I never saw him being afraid again.

I didn't go to work the next day. I was with my brother the whole day long, trying to find a place for him again – for the night. Nothing worked. Evening came and we were still on the street. Suddenly I remembered that beautiful sweet woman customer who gave me her address way back in one of the shops I was working. The woman who told me she will take me in once she will get the Jewish apartment she was promised. Out with the address book.

There it was Vig Street 6.

"Come, Gyuri."

This street was in the red light district. It was dark when we reached it. We saw heavily made up women standing around in garish clothes. We arrived to a regular apartment house. When we stood before the door I smiled and said to my brother, "Skillfully, old boy. You know our story ?" The door opened. We walked in. There was the woman with

the same friendly smile and wasn't too surprised to see us.

"Look this is my cousin. He ran away from home because the Russians were coming. Could you give him a place to sleep please?"

"But of course, poor boy. We will make room for him. Next week I am moving in the Jewish apartment. Then I can take him in as a roomer."

I was relieved. I went to work the next day. I knew Gyuri was in no danger in Mrs Szilagyi's kitchen,

When Mrs. Szilagyi got the Jewish apartment which was in the same building I moved there too, leaving my cell and loneliness for that loving, warm home. I didn't think of the fact that this apartment in which I found this home, belonged to a Jewish family – who knows where they are now, or if they are even alive. I was singing happily along with Mrs. Szilagyi when we washed the windows, mopped the floors, cleaned the cabinets.

"I am so happy to have my own apartment. I was living with my sister in law – upstairs for years," Mrs. Szilagyi said.

I shared her joy in her new home and my heart didn't ache for the Jewish family thrown out of there. This was my strength then, that I didn't feel yet the anguish, the pain, for the tragedy of my people. Then I only grieved for what they did to me and couldn't feel the collective pain of the tragedy.

Later I asked myself many times. "Why didn't I do something? Why didn't I get myself a gun ?" The nights were long and dark. I never found an answer to this question, only time can bring a person to act heroically, time that ripens, deepens the feelings until one is ready for everything. They didn't give us time for this.

All was well, but still I thought Gyuri can't sit all day in Mrs. Szilagyi's kitchen. This will be soon suspicious. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't come up with an idea as to what to do with him during the day. Until one day in the beauty shop, a woman complained that her husband, a tailor, can't get a young boy to do certain easy jobs around the shop. I sent my brother there and now, across the street from me on the second floor, my brother was sitting in the tailor's shop, by the warm stove working on some garment.

In the daytime, air raids, when my brother and I were sitting in different shelters, we

were worried about each other. It is remarkable how we didn't think of anybody else at this time. We never talked about our parents and we never cried. We lived for each other.

One time during an air raid, an old man came in the shelter with the yellow star on his chest, he was accompanying three small boys, each wearing big yellow stars.

People in the shelter were unhappy.

"How come these Jews come in here ? Who let them in? This is a Christian house."

But on the streets bombs were falling, so they finally had to let them stay.

I went and sat beside them. I tried to have the face of a Christian woman who is just interested in their story. I asked the old man why is he on the street when the Jews have to be locked up in the Jewish houses?

"Oh, dear lady, these children live in my house. They are not related. Their parents were taken away and I took them in. But I have no food left in the house, and I am sick, so I will take them to the Swedish consulate, hoping they can take them to some orphanage."

The three children looked at me with wide opened eyes, they said nothing.

But I felt the disapproval of my fellow Christians of me sitting beside the Jews. So with aching heart, I got up and left the little group.

The air raid ended. People were anxious to get out to the fresh air. I stood there on the sidewalk waiting to see which way the old man and those children are going.

They went toward the Swedish embassy. They walked slowly , holding hands, the poor orphans. They were dressed, neatly, cleanly. One had a small valise, the other a backpack, the third had a paper bag. Poor children, what are your sins, that now you are carrying all your possessions, forced to go and try to find some place to sleep, something to eat. Your parents were taken from you, by a dark, merciless power, the same who took my parents. One child kept pulling his socks up, which kept sliding back down.

Something fell out of his bag. He didn't notice. But I did. I called out, "little boy, you lost something." He looked back, smiling, picked up a shirt, dusted it off carefully then put it back in his bag.

Why did I have to see this ? Those children with the old man? I felt such anguish. The first time I had an inkling of the magnitude of the collective suffering.

I had to chase away this episode from my mind. I can allow only the feelings of

Elisabeth Kovacs. And Ms. Kovacs can't be interested in the Jewish tragedy. I thought when I will be free again I can remember all this and cry all I want. But not now. Not yet. I changed jobs again. I wanted to work closer to home.

Food was a problem. The food in restaurants was watered down cabbage soup, maybe some bread. Sometime my brother and I left the restaurant scarcely less hungry than when we went in. Mrs. Szilagyi peeled an apple every day for her son, and she gave us the peel. We were starving. Then we somehow got used to it and didn't suffer too much. The days passed. Christmas was approaching, their biggest holiday. And the Russians were just a short tram ride away. Russian airplanes could now fly over Budapest and kill people on the street with machine guns. They did that several times a day. I still went to work every day and it is hard to believe, but the shop was busier than ever. The women wanted to look good, no matter what.

One day at lunch time, I was walking on the street when I heard airplanes above me. I jumped in a store, but a woman walking if front of me was hit and died instantly, right there on the sidewalk in front of me. When the planes departed, the people hidden, came out and carefully walked around the dead woman and went their way. You saw rubble everywhere and dead bodies, too. People ran from one shelter door to another. But Budapest was still alive. The restaurants were open, trams still moved where the tracks were not destroyed, the stores were open. In the shop, an older woman who came to have her hair to be tinted said laughingly, "boy I was so afraid to cross the street, I could have been killed if a plane would go by."

But the sound of the cannons, the machine guns reminded one to the fact that this is the last days of the city that was so beautiful, so glamorous. The city was now getting ready to die. And for what?

The Hungarian government now fulfilled his pledge to stay with the Germans to the end. They were ready to surrender their beautiful Budapest to the hand to hand, house to house combat, never giving an inch.

Every man who could hold a gun was called in service. Even sixteen year olds. \

One night when I lay sleepless in my bed. I heard a unit marching under our window. In the cold, quiet night they were singing, "Who knows if I will ever hug you again, kiss you again? Tonight we are marching we are the brigade of the dead. Good by,

sweetheart." The voices were those of very young men. I went to the window and saw some heads across the street popping out from the windows, then everybody went back to sleep.

The Jews were locked in the ghetto. The part of the city which was designated as ghetto was now surrounded with a strong fence, and was guarded. I never went to that part of the city. I stopped thinking about the suffering of the Jews. I had enough worry to find something to eat for both of us.

The Russians came closer and closer. They now shot with the cannons into the next street to us. In spite of that, people were getting ready to celebrate Christmas. They were ready to celebrate the birthday of Christ, who preached love, forgiveness which was there and then an almost alien concept.

We were invited to Mrs. Szilagyi's party. I bought a Christmas present for Mrs. Szilagyi whom I now called in her first name, Ica, and whom I loved now very much. I bought her a little China figurine of a blonde little boy. I helped to decorate the Christmas tree and put my small present under it. We sang Christmas songs, everybody cried, I cried too, it was easy. During the Christmas dinner, we heard the constant sound of cannons. The window panes were trembling. They are coming closer, someone said with sorrowful voice. They are coming closer thought I with joy in my heart.

Shortly after Christmas, we moved down into the shelter, after a cannon ball hit our building. Gyuri and I had somehow fabricated a wide bed in a corner of the shelter. We took what little possessions we had down there. I was still attempting to go to work, but didn't get too far when realizing that the streets are now a battlefield. The Russian planes with their machine guns were above us all the time – firing. I was praying to please let me once more get back to the shelter. I didn't leave the shelter after that. The shelter was now fully occupied. Beds everywhere with tired faced people sitting on them.

I was thinking that if I can't go to work any more, I will have no money. How will we get food? I didn't realize that money couldn't help me anymore. That day the siege of Budapest started – no more stores – no more restaurants. Somebody said that people who risk it can get food from the nearest army kitchen. So, for a few days, my brother went every noon, risking his life for a bowl of beans. We sat on our bed and ate from the same bowl. One day Gyuri came back with an empty bowl and very agitated.

"Elisabeth, I can't go out anymore. It is not that I am afraid, but I saw something out there that I can not see again." His eyes reflected the horror he saw.

I told him that of course I wouldn't let him go out again. Among so many people down in the basement, we will not die of hunger. And I was right. Above us on the street, soldiers fought hand to hand combat. Down in our basement women were cooking, On Sundays they even baked. There was always a little bit given for the hungry "Kovacs children." Someone who was fetching water came back with the news that a dead horse was lying on the street. Then Gyuri with a newly acquired friend went up and among the flying bullets crawling on their bellies approached the horse, and cut a piece of meat. Then in a borrowed dish I cooked a splendid dinner. There was an old woman living all alone, so Gyuri offered her some meat. She refused saying she would rather die of hunger than eat horse meat. Next time Gyuri brought down meat, he told her that it is meat from a cow. The old lady happily believed that on the streets of Budapest cows are hit by bullets. She smiled and said, "I will cook a good goulash."

I was always in the basement, never even went out to the courtyard to get some fresh air. I was very pale. To the insistence of my brother, one sunny morning I went up the steps leading to the courtyard. We couldn't make the next step. We heard an extremely loud noise and the air pressure threw us back down. We looked at each other – what was this? We found out two minutes later our house was hit with a bomb.

The upper floors were totally destroyed. A woman came down to the shelter with a baby in her arms, they stayed in their apartment and were there when the bomb fell. It was a miracle that they weren't killed. Mother and baby were covered with a fine white powder of crushed stone. A woman left the shelter to investigate the state of her apartment. She came back with a loud cry, saying that her apartment had disappeared from the face of the earth. She was inconsolable. She kept crying for hours saying, "we lost everything, we have nothing but the clothes on our back. Ten years of working , saving and now what?" So it went the lament. First I felt sorry for this woman, but suddenly my sympathy turned to anger. She is crying here for furniture, linen, dishes, rugs. I wanted to cry out my home was destroyed too, but that didn't satisfy enough. They took away my father and mother. You are alive, your husband is alive, you are together, you will have a new couch, linen, dishes – but me – where should I go to look for my parents? You robbed

and dispersed hundreds of thousands. You are weak. You can't take adversity.

I couldn't say this, so I said nothing. I sat down on my bed looking at the flickering light of the lamp and thought, "Oh, my God, I am a different person now. I carry terrible thoughts in my head. I find out today that I am not the same Agnes I was.

My brother. Yes I have my brother. I wondered what will happen to us. Will we survive? I shook my head to shake out these thoughts and became Elisabeth Kovacs again, a girl who hasn't got a past and hasn't got a future, and she doesn't care.

Mrs. Szilagyi also lost her apartment . But she didn't cry. She asked me to go upstairs with her to look through the rubble, maybe we will find something useful. This was the first time I saw the total destruction of a home. Mrs. Szilagyi's eyes were dry. We started to move the heavy stones, looking for something we could use. Suddenly, under a heavy stone I find the pieces of the little china figurine. I collected the pieces, held it in my hand and thought, this is how they destroy everything beautiful. I no longer knew who "they" was. I only knew what they did. I let the pieces slowly fall out of my hand, until all I had left in my palm was a small amount of grey powder. Good thing I didn't know yet, that what was the most precious, the most beautiful in my life, my mother, was also destroyed and all it was left of her was a handful of grey powder, like this in my palm that now the wind blew away. If I had known it then, I don't think I would have had the will to fight for my life. I would have sought death. But I didn't know it yet, so I was looking through the rubble with Ica, able to maintain my Elisabeth Kovacs persona. We didn't find anything useful and went back to the shelter.

Another morning came. The women were preparing breakfast. I washed my hair and now was drying it. A woman was washing diapers, my brother found some paper and a piece of

charcoal and was drawing. Above us men and machines fought, we could hear the noise of it. But down here in the shelter it was just another day we had to go through somehow. I was happy when night fell and we could go to sleep, maybe I will dream something beautiful. I was awoken by four Hungarian soldiers who entered the shelter and shone their flashlight on Gyuri and me. Our beds were right by the door.

"Everybody wake up. We will look at everybody's papers. We have received information that a Jew is hiding somewhere in these buildings."

Gyuri woke up and looked sleepily in the face of the soldier.

"First you, young man. Where did you get that military great coat you are covered with?"

"Mrs. Szilagyi, whose bed was not far from ours said, "I gave it to the boy. It belonged to my husband. These two children were living with me."

"Well is this so ?" You will have to prove it to us if it is so, and you will have to tell us where your husband is serving, because many a coward ran away, and now hiding behind their wives' skirts."

"My husband was killed in the war. I am a widow."

"You have to prove it." And so and so on, Mrs. Szilagyi started to cry, looking for the necessary documents.

The attention of the soldiers was now shifted permanently away from Gyuri. After Mrs. Szilagyi they went through the shelter and everybody had to show their papers. We were the only two who was not asked. When they left and the shelter was quiet again, my heart was racing. Tonight we escaped. But tomorrow?

The following night the military police came. They searched the whole building. They didn't come down to the shelter.

They found a Jewish boy of about twenty two among the rubble on the upper floor. The men then brought this boy down with grinning happy faces, pushing him along. The boy was in the house for days now as we later heard. His Christian girlfriend was feeding him. The girl was nowhere to be seen now. The boy was wearing the uniform of the Hungarian soldier. His eyes spoke of the fear he felt. He kept repeating "I am not a Jew. I have special privileges."

One of the policemen laughed and said, "Okay. Then we will shoot a special bullet in your head."

Gyuri and I had to just stay there and watch without betraying any emotion.

When the soldiers had enough fun with the boy, they took him upstairs and a few moments later, we heard the gunshot. Only then did I let go of my rigid shoulders and Gyuri had opened his clenched fist.

Above us the battle of Budapest raged. Not for one minute did the guns quiet down, day and night. I knew that the moment when I will see my liberators is getting very near.

I was waiting for them desperately. One morning we woke up to silence. We went upstairs and saw the army reserve building broken open and people were looting the food. Gyuri immediately joined them. He came back with salted meat and ham. He went back three times. The third time the Russians started to machine gun the area. Gyuri threw away the loot and came back crawling on his belly. We gave away most of the meat and ham.

The next morning January 3, 1994 a Russian soldier came down to our shelter. He looked around and left.

I sat on my bed, holding my brother's hand. Said nothing, but my heart was leaping with joy. "We are free."

This blond Russian soldier, his shirt soaked with sweat, the machine gun across his chest, brought us our freedom. The rest of the people in the shelter looked at the soldier with hatred. They hated this young blond soldier who said nothing, did nothing, just looked around and left.

"The Russians are here!"

Somebody went up with a big pot of tea. They drank it. Nothing happened. It was quiet. Gyuri and I did not show our joy. We said nothing. We did our daily routing, but at night, the first time after a long time, we went to sleep as free people.

One day a man in a grey civilian suit walked in the courtyard. He came from Kispest and was a relative of a family in the shelter. People surrounded him, the first person we saw from the outside, asking him for news. We heard nothing for three weeks now.

He told us that they were fighting now in the inner city and that the way to Kispest is open. Gyuri and I looked at each other – we can leave. Finally we can leave. We decided to wait a few more days and then leave.

But the next day something happened that made our departure imminent.

Early morning, Gyuri, was just pulling on his pants when a Russian soldier walked in. He saw my brother, a young healthy man, jumped on him, held his arm and said," Nyemce, nyemce, which is Russian for "German." My brother's face was deadly pale. I understood the word "nyemce" because the Hungarian word for German is "nemet." I was petrified. I saved him from the Nazis and now I should lose him to a Russian? I yelled to the Russian soldier, "No, not nyemce, zsido," (zsido means "Jew" in Hungarian). "Do you hear me,

zsido, zsido, zsido!!!!" the Russian soldier let go of Gyuri and smiled at me. " Zsid? "Charaso yevrey" and he left ("zsid" is Jew in Russian slang.) I had no idea how the people in the

shelter who witnessed this incident will react to this unveiling of our true identity. But what happened next was something I really couldn't imagine happening. They surrounded us smiling, saying, "Oh, Elisabeth, you are really a smart girl. You came up with this lie – possibly the only lie that could save your cousins – that you are Jewish, ha, ha, ha."

I stood by my bed, shaking. My nerves were still raw of what just happened, in my heart I felt all the suffering, injustice, humiliation of the past nine months. I straightened up, I looked at the people around me , and I am sure my face went through a total change, because the people looked at me with amazement.

"No, I didn't lie. We are Jews. My brother and I."

Everybody started talking at once. Only Mrs. Szilagyi stood beside us. The people started to insult us with curses and the faces betrayed their hatred to us. I was standing in front of that mob, my terrible sin was out in the open. Then an old woman came forward. "How dare you to have lived among us, in a Christian house, in the same shelter." How did we dare? Listen to me, I will tell you how. I don't care anymore, because within an hour we will leave here. But I want to tell you, I want to answer your question. You cried every night for your son. We also have a mother who is crying somewhere – I don't know where, for us. You condemned us to death. What did we ever do , to be condemned to death? Yes, we lied and lived among you to save our lives. But why should I bother talking to you? You are not human anymore. But rest assured, I hate you. too. This is all I want to say."

Gyuri tried to restrain me from speaking, but couldn't. Mrs. Szilagyi's beautiful blue eyes were full of tears. But the crowd around us had their hatred shown on their faces. They knew they can't do anything to us. The Germans and the arrowcross were now gone.

I started to pack crying. Mrs. Szilagyi begged me not to leave and go into this dangerous unknown world, but I told her sadly, "What do you think, if the Germans would take back our street for half a day, these people would have us shot for sure."

I took all the food Gyuri stole from the depot. I also took my yellow comforter that my

mother gave me as a wedding present. It was filled with down. One side of it was yellow silk, the other, pink. I've made it into a giant muff, with strings, tied every which way. To get dressed for the journey posed a big dilemma. It was January and very cold. Snow covered everything. We were going into the unknown. We had no idea where we will sleep tonight. We should dress warmly. But how? Gyuri was given by Mrs. Szilagyi a good warm pair of pants from the military. I put on those pants. I mended Gyuri's old pants and it looked okay. Gyuri's boots were worn and in bad shape. He put on both his shirts, a pullover and then his coat. He had no jacket. I put on my strongest shoes. I had no boots. I had a winter jacket that my father had made for me, this was what I was wearing.

When we walked through the door into the street, my eyes hurt from the bright light. Gyuri was carrying the little suitcase with the food. I was carrying the comforter-muff. We only said goodbye to Mrs. Szilagyi and left the shelter with those cutting, hateful eyes on us. We held our heads high.

It was ten o'clock in the morning. We heard the distant sound of the cannons. The fighting was now in Buda, on the other side of the Danube. This was the first time in three weeks that I left the shelter and was on the street. I was amazed at the destruction. Every house was in ruins, and there were dead people lying on the street. We didn't look around. We started walking.

"Let's go to Kispest. See if we can find Mrs. Szabo. From there we will continue."

We found everything very interesting. We saw a German soldier's body lying beside a Russian soldier. The next street had more people walking. In front of a building an old man was standing with the yellow star on his chest who was telling a captivated audience, "Then the Russians pulled down the fence of the ghetto and we knew that finally we are free."

As we walked along, we saw more and more people. Some were pulling little wagons with some stuff in it, others had carried huge packages on their backs, others seemed just wondering around carrying nothing, dazed.

We reached the city limit. There was a Russian checkpoint there. Until then we only saw dead Russians – a lot of them, but now here were standing the Russian soldiers, in fur hats, and let nobody through. They were telling us something but nobody understood

them. Finally somehow they made us understand that we have to go in that small house, where we have to prove our identity, then we can leave the city. Gyuri went in, came out a short time later without his watch. "They were very nice. They look at my papers, I gave them the ones you made for me, I don't have any others. But they found it okay. Then they saw my wristwatch. They pointed at it, I think they wanted it. So I took it off and gave it to them."

"It's alright Gyuri, they deserve all we could give them. Besides, I still have mine."

Gyuri had no time to grieve for his watch, because our little group was now let pass on to the big highway that leads to Kispest.

We finally left Budapest. We left the ruined, blood soaked city where we experienced the first horrible experiences of our short lives. We were walking on the highway. On both sides were fields covered with snow.

"Look, look at those children, as they are walking. They are pale, they took deep breathes from the fresh air. Their eyes now have a different luster. Look at that sixteen year old boy who already stood in his underwear with his comrades, in front of a grave they dug for themselves. The firing squad was ready, when Russian planes appeared, execution postponed. Look his eyes are clearing. Maybe the broken mirror can be whole again? Look at that eighteen year old woman who now let the sharp wind blow her hair. Look, she walked on the edges of death in her high heels and now she is smiling."

We were walking. Gyuri had no gloves. His hand on the handle of the suitcase became very red. He changed hands often, but still his hands were freezing. We passed an older couple pulling a homemade sleigh with their stuff on it.

"Young man, I see your hands are cold. Put your packages on the sleigh and we will alternately pull it."

We did. I even put the silk comforter on but somehow it touched the pavement on the sleigh was pulled, the beautiful yellow silk got ripped and the white down started coming out like snow. So we ended this association to the great sorrow of the old gentleman whose idea of the shared task of pulling the sleigh was that Gyuri will pull and he will watch. We saw no more Russian soldiers, but we heard the sound of the cannons. It seemed that it sounded close. We sped up our pace fretting that the front may have been pushed back. But soon there was no more cannon fire heard, so we walked slowly, not

thinking of anything.

We arrived at noon to the house of Mrs. Szabo. Happily the house was intact, and Mrs. Szabo came out to greet us. We started talking about our experiences, how we survived the siege of Budapest. We were very hungry. Mrs. Szabo had nothing to give us to eat. "I have nothing here. Not even a slice of bread." She was sitting in the kitchen, her shoulders covered with a blanket, beside the cold stove.

We had a big can that Gyuri had taken from the depot with vegetables and meat in it. It was about ten pounds. We opened it. Ate two pounds of it, cold, without bread. Offered some to Mrs. Szabo but she was afraid to eat it cold, so she put her share in a dish for later.

"No, you can't sleep here. All my beds are occupied." For some reason she didn't want to let us sleep there. So we had to leave. Gyuri was carrying the open can that had the remnants of the food in it – in his arms, like a baby.

On the street again. The streets of Kispest were busy. We saw lots of Russian soldiers male and female. There were some stores open. Some of the stores had signs written with Cirillic alphabet.

At the crossroads a Russian soldier, a woman, was directing traffic.

We felt good in this atmosphere of frontier spirit. We felt the promise of a new life. We did not worry about anything. We felt happy and without a care. Not a penny in our pocket, but we believed in ourselves. We feared nothing.

A young man joined us on the road. He was about twenty. Just walked beside us, saying nothing. We asked, "where are you heading?

"Home to my parent's farm near Debrecen. I fought in the siege of Budapest, but I had enough. I am going home."

We agreed , yes it was enough. We didn't think of the fact that a few days ago he belonged to the enemy. Now he wore civilian clothes. He took off, left his unit. Good for him.

"Where are you heading?"

" We are also going home. To Miskolc. But we are Jews, we don't think anybody is waiting for us there."

The boy nodded. "Let's walk together."

"Okay." We didn't talk again until we reached Pestszentlorinc. We arrived to this small town in late afternoon. We saw very few people on the street. The houses seemed empty. Finally a man walked toward us, and we asked if he knows a place where we could sleep tonight. He said that we should go to the Communist party headquarters. They will tell us what we want to know. He showed us the direction to the building. The building had a huge red flag flying from the roof. Inside in the well heated room, several men wearing red armbands were working the desks.

"Go to the elementary school. You will find there more people like you , uhm, homeless. You can sleep there. "

Wonderful. We went. All sorts of people mingled around the classrooms. Straw mattresses were available. Gyuri and Bela, our new friend, brought in three. I put our packages on one, and I was ready to go to bed. Gyuri said, "No, we have to look around before it gets too dark. Did you see if those empty houses? We have to check it out. We might find food. We left Bela to guard our packages and walked out again into the grey winter evening. We had no idea that the Russians warned the population not to go out after 6 PM. Anybody found on the streets after the 6PM curfew would be shot without questioning or warning. We walked along talking. The silence was frightening in the deserted village. We entered an empty house. The furniture stood there like silent monsters.

"Gyuri, I am frightened. Let's leave."

We hurried back from the silent territory of the dead. Into the new homey school room. Somebody lit a fire in the stove. It was nice and warm in the room. I looked around and saw all kinds of people, some old, some young, every kind. I felt I belong with them. I laid down without undressing. I only took my shoes off. Beside me on the next straw mattress was a young woman who immediately introduced herself. Her name was Marika. She said she is a teacher and is going home to her parents. In five minutes we became good friends. Christians surrounded us. This little teacher who now was sharing my comforter is Christian, too. But I felt no hatred no anger against them. I didn't think about that just a few days ago those same people agreed to all the things done to Jews. It was as if for the first night of our freedom, the Russians gave us the gift of all men being equal. In that big classroom, that mixed bag of people felt like family.

Gyuri sat by the stove. He was warming the can of vegetables and meat. There were a few other men sitting around the stove. The red light from the flames illuminated their tired faces, all of them needing a shave. One of them was talking.

"I was fighting in Budapest, but I realized that we lost this war. So I ran away. But I was caught and they brought me to Andrassy Street into the arrowcross house, you know, where the Jews were taken. They beat me up terribly down in the basement. I lost six teeth in the beatings. They were yelling, "you deserter. When they finished with me, I was all bloody and hurting like hell. But with the Jews, they didn't bother beating them. They just shot them one after the other. Boy. The things I saw there! One day they brought down a pretty young girl. She was caught on the street with forged papers. They bear the girl mercilessly. Then shot her."

Nobody talked. Just listened. Some people were not even paying attention to the monotonous talk. The can of vegetables was ready. Gyuri took it off the stove. The people around us looked at the food with hungry eyes. Gyuri whispered in my ear. "I want to share the food with them, they are so hungry." We portioned out the remaining food in the can, so everyone who asked got some. Now at least we don't have to carry it around. Soon people started to lay down to sleep. I fell into a deep sleep. In the middle of the night I woke up realizing I am cold. The fire in the stove died. It was very cold in the room. The light was on in the room. Men were snoring, some lay down on the floor, some sat on chairs, not everybody got a mattress. In the other end of the room a diabetic woman slept with her three children. Earlier in the evening she asked our permission to bring in some kind of a vessel, because due to her illness she has to urinate often, she couldn't go out into the cold night to do it. We agreed. I looked at everything, I sighed and fell asleep again.

I woke up in the morning in a warm room. Somebody made a fire in the stove. People were coming-going busily. I jumped up, looking for Gyuri. "He went out to look around" said Bela. I wanted to wash, but I couldn't see any possibility of that. It was very cold outside. During the night lots of snow fell. I washed my hands and face with snow. Soon Gyuri came back his face beaming, bringing a small bag of dry bread pieces, some frugal housewife had saved these bits and pieces of bread for making breadcrumbs later.

"Bread, bread, my God, Gyuri, this is a real treasure. I can't remember when I last ate

bread."

He found some dry pasta also. I decided to cook the pasta for breakfast. I had no idea how to prepare it. I washed out the can which had the vegetables in it, put the pasta in, filled in with water and put it on the stove to cook. I cooked it a long time, looking at it, time to time, waiting for it to look like pasta my mother used to cook. It never did of course. It became a white glue like substance which nobody could eat, no matter how hungry. So with aching hearts we had to throw it out. But we had bread! We hid in a corner and sucked on the stone dry bread pieces until we could bite it. It was delicious. Somebody had found a map in one of the classrooms. People looked at it, trying to decide which way to go. Some people started to leave, the room was slowly emptying out. Finally it was I, Gyuri, Bela and two young men about twenty who were left. It felt good to sit around the stove a little bit longer. It was very cold outside. But finally we had to leave too. Miskolc was far away.

The two young men joined us. I asked where were they heading.

"We came from the ghetto and it doesn't matter where we are going. We will go to a place where there is food."

The other one said, "We have no baggage, what for? Look! This is how one should travel.

Towel around neck – like a shawl. Toothbrush in pocket. Good? Eh?" We thought they were right because our packages were a terrible burden to us. My poor brother's hands were freezing on the handle of the valise. We were walking on the main street of Lorinc now. The two boys were constantly telling jokes, making us laugh. We looked in the abandoned houses. In one house we found a bottle of mustard, and a cinnamon stick. We kept smelling the stick, because it smelled like cookies. We were about to step out of the house when Bela suddenly pulled us back. The two boys were already on the street. The Russians were herding a big group of men and when they noticed the two boys, they grabbed them and put them with the others. But the boys were still smiling. I guess if the worst already happened to you, it is not easy to ruin your good mood even if you might end up in Russia as a prisoner of war. When the group was far enough , we came out of the house and from then on we walked only on side streets.

Gyuri complained that he can't carry the valise anymore. We went into a house, and I put

everything into a wardrobe including the beautiful black alligator pocketbook my mother gave me. It was hers, she gave it to me when I got engaged. We kept the food, a change of underwear and a towel.

On the road again, who do we see but the two boys. "We escaped" they said laughingly. We decided to stay together. Sanyi and Tibi were their names. So we were five now. We were walking in the fresh snow when suddenly a Russian soldier accosted us.

He said something we didn't understand. But he explained to us somehow with sign language that he needed these men for some work and that we should follow him. Okay, we walked behind him.

We entered a small house where five or six men were already collected. The Russian locked us in with them and went to search for more people. He came back soon with six other men and we started marching. Thank God, we were going forward, and not back where we came from. We arrived to a busy street, stopped in front of the Russian commando building. They told us to clean part of the front yard for parking space. We were given shovels and told to get to work. When I walked away with the men to the designated spot, the Russians laughingly stopped me , took the shovel away from me saying that "the girl doesn't have to work." So I was just standing there watching the men. Gyuri gave his all to the work but Sanyi and Tibi worked a little, then stood around some looking around with a sour expression. Beautiful Russian women soldiers were walking around. I admired one tall red haired woman who was wearing a pair of highly polished boots above which, on her knees, silk stockings visible, and she had a colorful scarf around her neck. I haven't seen this abundance of luxurious female adornments for a long time now. I became aware of the fact that I am wearing a man's pair of pants and some colorless scarf on my head. In spite of that I noticed that the soldiers expressed great interest in my person. I thought it better to disappear from view. Went into a house across the street which seem inhabited. I found an old couple there who said they are glad to let me stay and even offered me some freshly baked potatoes. At noon, the Russians fed the workers, and I also got food from them. The men finished the task at four in the afternoon. We decided to walk to Ferihegy which was near and spend the night there. It was dark when we arrived at Ferihegy. We saw a woman walking and asked her where we could sleep. She took us to Mr. Buga's house. The door was not locked so we

entered. We found ourselves in the kitchen. It was dark in there. When we got used to it we saw a bed in which a skinny old man was lying and looking at us, without speaking.

"We were sent here. Maybe Mr. Buga can let us sleep here in the corner?"

"Sure. I let you sleep here. Why not? My daughter, son in law, my two grandchildren went away with the Germans leaving me here all by myself, old and sick as I am. Only I can not give you beds to sleep on. All the beds were chopped up for firewood by people who came in, just like you. You, too, if you find any furniture, just chop it up and build a fire. I think there is a table somewhere. Look for it. It will be good for me, too. I will be in a warm room."

We looked at this poor old man with great sympathy. The boys got to work. Gyuri and Bela that is. Sanyi and Tibi were talking to me explaining that they made friends with a guy who has a car, and tomorrow morning he is driving to Hatvan. I was elated. Hatvan is half way to Miskolc from Budapest.

The boys found a small night table and chopped it to pieces. They made a fire. The old man just lay in bed quietly. They found a small piece of candle somewhere. I found a basin, warmed some water and finally could wash, while the boys turned their backs. Gyuri didn't want to wash. Only Tibi washed, finally having found use for the towel he was carrying around his neck. Then I gave everyone three pieces of dry bread and some bacon. I managed our treasure of dry bread and bacon. Nobody tried to have more. We had about fifty pieces of bread and a good slice of bacon left. The old man munched on these delicacies for a long time. After the feast we lay around the fire. It was very cold outside.

We agreed to alternate during the night watching the fire.

Gyuri was tired and very sleepy. He just fell asleep. I covered him with the comforter.

We were talking real quietly among us. We heard voices. Three men and a little boy came in ~~wandere~~ WANDERERS, like us. They settled down in a corner and soon were asleep. The old man in the bed was sleeping too. We fell asleep sitting on chairs. My head was in Tibi's lap, his was on the knees of Sanyi, the head of Bela rested on Gyuri's shoes. I woke up to the fact that I was cold. The candle was out, the stove was cold. I was shivering. Quickly I went under the comforter besides Gyuri.

We woke up to a tremendous noise. We heard Russian spoken by our door. The boys

became alert instantly. It was still night, what can they possibly want? We heard, "Barisnya, barisnya." We already knew this meant "woman." They looking for you, Agi. Hide in the other room." I found nothing to hide under or behind there so just sat on the floor in a corner. I heard the boys unlocking the door and letting the drunk Russians in. "Look, there isn't any barisnya here. She is sleeping elsewhere." They somehow convinced them and the Russians left, singing. We couldn't fall asleep after this so easily, but did finally and awaken at 7. So we missed the car.

When we said goodbye to the old man, he smiled at us sweetly and asked us if we could give him a little piece of soap. I broke my only cake of soap in two and gave it to him. We breakfasted again on dry bread and ham, then left. We met some men going to work and they told us that from the next town there is train travel. Train! When we heard this word we doubled our speed. Only poor Gyuri was walking behind us. The remaining package was still too much for him and there was now a hole in his boots so water could and did seep in. He was cold. But we walked and left Ferihegy and now was walking on a highway leading to the next village. Suddenly Russian soldiers stopped us. They had an interpreter who told us that nobody can go further without a special permit which we can obtain in the Russian commando house in Ferihegy if we can prove the necessity for us to leave. We had to walk back to Ferihegy. In the Russian commando, we were told that such a permit is not obtainable because this territory here is still considered the front, so nobody can leave here. We left the building with heavy hearts. I said, "Boys, my brother and I have to go on . We are not afraid. We will cut through on the fields. They tried to talk us out of this. " Agi, this is dangerous. If they see you, which they probably will, they just shoot you in the back."

"We can't walk back to Budapest. To where? To whom? We can't stay here. It's nothing here. No food – nothing. We really have no choice."

The boys saw that what I said made sense, so they decided to join us.

We got to the fields. Luckily there was a deep ditch along the fields and we were dragging ourselves on our bellies. We advanced like this for a long time. I looked around and saw that we left the Russian checkpoint behind. Soon the ditch ended and we walked on a rural road. At the end of the road, a Russian soldier stood, pointing his gun to us. "Documents," said the Russian. We indicated that we have none. The Russian started to

yell at us, naturally we had no idea what he was saying. Then he spotted my wristwatch. I took it off and offered it to him. He smiled at me and shook his head. He opened his quilted great coat, on the lining there was wristwatch beside wristwatch sewn on. They are like children I thought.

But he was merciless. He ordered us back. We started to walk back in the ditch again. But we knew that we will have to get through here somehow. After a while, we looked back. We saw the Russian walk one way and then turn around and walk back. When he had his back to us we jumped out of the ditch and ran through the fields then lie down on the earth. This way we finally reached a small hill and we could see on top of it the houses of the next village. Walking up on that hill was the most dangerous part. Our backs were itching, thinking that any minute we can get a bullet in it. Our hearts raced. But nothing happened and we arrived to the village. "We won, boys," said I. We were dead tired. Gyuri still carried the valise with our food, and he kept begging Sanyi and Tibi to carry it a little way – but the boys just laughed and said, "your misery does not interest us." Finally Bela took the valise and carried it.

We arrived to the railroad station. A train stood there made entirely of cattle cars. Inside people were sitting. The locomotive was taking in water. We panicked. "Dear God, a train and it looks as if it will leave shortly. In our hurry to get on the train we lost Bela. There were benches in the wagons, and we found a place to sit. No sooner we sat down, the train started to move. We didn't know where it was heading, but it didn't matter. Just away from Budapest, away from the bombs and cannons. Gyuri and I sat beside each other. The only feeling we had then was tiredness. I took out the dry bread and ham which started to become a little boring. I was thinking of warm food, a bed, a bath. Unattainable things.

Sanyi and Tibi looked at us hungrily but I told them. "I will not give you any of this because you refused to carry the valise and laughed at Gyuri who was suffering. Miskolc is far away. We need all we got."

Sanyi and Tibi collected all their dignity and looked at us cynically. "Who needs your lousy food? Those bits of pieces of dry bread and the ham that is so salty. Look, I have in my pocket three rolls of sewing thread. I will get off this train in the next village and will get for it such good food that you two will faint when you see it."

The train very shortly stopped. Small houses were standing nearby. Sanyi and Tibi jumped down and disappeared. One half hour later they were back with a shoe-box. From it they took out wonderful things – white bread, jam, sausages, cheese. We couldn't watch them eating it. We turned our heads.

The train stood there for another hour and half, then we moved some, stalled some, moved again. Slowly darkness descended. Finally somewhere near a small station it was announced that this is as far as the train will go. We went in the small waiting room which was already crowded. In a large stove a good fire was going. We laid down on the floor, tried to sleep, but the noise was too loud, and also we were hungry. By the light of the fire I saw a beautiful young girl changing the bandages on a wound on her thigh. "I was shot" she said. But nobody cared. Finally I fell asleep and slept all through the night deeply and satisfyingly. In the morning, no washing, no combing of hair. We ate the usual and hurried out to the fresh air, the deep snow. After the fetid air of the waiting room it felt wonderful.

Our train was gone. We saw nobody around. Finally we spotted a man wearing the hat of a railroad employee. The rest of him was enveloped in a huge fur trimmed coat. We asked him when will we have a train? "Well, I don't know. Maybe this afternoon, maybe tomorrow. This is just a local station, you ought to go to Hatvan which is four miles from here. There you more likely to get a train." We looked at each other. How can we walk four miles in this cold and with empty stomachs ? On my feet a flimsy pair of shoes, the soles of Gyuri's boots were peeling away, he tied a piece of string around it. We were standing around trying to decide. Finally we started walking. The railroad track like an endless iron snake was lying in front of us. The cold wind was blowing the snow. We didn't talk, because the air was so cold we didn't want it through our mouths.

We never remembered such a cold day. We walked fast and in an hour we were tired. But we couldn't rest in this cold, and now there was no sign of human life anywhere. We were just dragging ourselves when we saw a small house by the track and we saw smoke curling from the chimney.

"Gyuri. Look. Look a house. There are people there. Maybe they will even give us some hot food. Come, let's speed up."

We found a nice young couple in this one room house, which belonged to the rail road. The fire was lively in the stove, and the young woman was cooking pasta for dinner. We were asked to sit down . We were inhaling deeply the wonderful aroma of food.

We were given each a big portion of pasta and thought that we will eat it in five minutes, but to our biggest surprise, we felt full after a few forksfull and only with great difficulty we were able to eat the half of the portion given. Our stomachs were now shrunken from half starvation for months. We left the food there with aching hearts. When after thanking them – we were out again, we realized we could have asked to put it in a piece of paper and could have had carried along.

There we were again on those tracks and was walking. It seemed that we walked already more than four miles. Gyuri stood behind, he had to go. I walked ahead. Suddenly I heard his voice. It was so cold that while his hands were not in his pockets, they became numb. Gyuri couldn't use them to pull up his pants. I was laughing and pulled his pants up.

After fifteen minutes the same scenario ~~on~~ ONLY the roles were reversed. I couldn't pull my pants up, and now Gyuri was laughing helping me.

We saw a small farmhouse in the field. Decided to go investigate. It was hard walking on the field and suddenly I felt such deep anger, frustration, despair, against fate that gives us such rough treatment. I started to curse violently, loudly. Gyuri laughed so hard that his tears were flowing. Finally I laughed too. We arrived to the farmhouse which was standing alone in that sea of snow. No sound of beast or man. Maybe the house is empty?! But no! There was a thin ribbon of smoke escaping from the chimney. We rapped on the door timidly. "Come in" was the answer, said in an unfriendly tone. We found two peasant women in the room, looking at us. On the bench beside the stove were freshly baked yellow squash. We looked at this so long not seen delicacy and asked,

"Could we have some of that squash, dear lady?"

"What do you have to give me for it?" I had a small role of white sewing thread, for this we were given two small pieces of squash which we ate immediately, standing there. We left shortly after this as we were not asked to sit down.

After another hour of walk, we arrived to Hatvan. Many people were waiting for a train on the station. When we will have a train here no one knew. We went in the waiting room where there was no place to sit, we just stood around. After waiting for two hours, a train

materialized. We didn't ask where the train was going, just boarded it. We traveled slowly for two or three hours, then stopped in front of some station.

"Get off, people. This is as far as the train goes."

Where the hell are we? The building of the station was bombed out, but the waiting room was standing. In it a big crowd. We find out we were in Szolnok.

"Gyuri, I would like to sleep in a bed tonight, and I would like to wash. Let's walk around, maybe we will find some good person who will let us in.

We walked toward the city. In the city, very few houses were standing. The rest of it lay in ruins. We hardly saw any people/

"Gyuri. We have to go back to the station. There is no life here. This is a ghost town."

Where are we going anyway, if this small town is ruined like this, then Miskolc is probably no more. Why did we survive? We have no home, no money. Should we live like this? You know what, Gyuri, let's kill ourselves. It is better to die then to sit through the night, filthy dirty as we are, in that crowded room. No, I can't take it any more. Come let's hold each other's hand and die together. I know Father and Mother are not alive anymore. I can feel it. Come!"

I was holding my brother's hand, pulling him. He just looked at me with his big brown eyes, as if he is thinking it over.

"Listen, it would be crazy to die now. We have time to do it later when we will be sure that we have no home and Father and Mother are dead."

With this the wish to die left my heart and was ready to fight again. All this lasted maybe five minutes, but I had never felt like this before. I wanted to die. But now, we started to walk on the street. A man came toward us, carrying water. He looked at us two strangers and he said, "It is better if you go home. Soon it will be dark. The Russians shoot people who are out in the dark.

"We have no place to go," I said.

"You have no place to stay?"

"No."

"You can come with me. I am all alone anyway. You brother and sister?"

"Yes."

"Well, come along."

We stopped in front of an intact house. The man unlocked the door. Inside he lit a lamp.

"Make yourselves comfortable."

I looked around the kitchen. In one corner a bed was standing. It was a good fire going in the stove. I will wash, I thought.

The man was very nice. He asked no questions. He wasn't interested in our names, circumstances. He was happy to have company for that night. He must have been very lonely. He gave me warm water and I washed. It didn't bother me that the man was looking. Then I ordered Gyuri to wash. He did so reluctantly.

"What should I cook for you. A little potato paprikash, maybe?"

"Oh dear God. We haven't eaten a thing like that for a long time. We have some salted ham. It will be good to cook it with it."

Gyuri was peeling the potatoes. The man ordered Gyuri around as if he was his servant. He cooked a kingly feast for us.

So it happened that this night, washed clean, stomach full, we slept in a bed.

In the morning we thanked the man, said our good byes, and walked to the station.

Several trains were now standing on the tracks. The waiting room was full of people. Everywhere Russian soldiers. We sat down on a worn bench. Beside us sat a young man in raggedy clothes . He probably spent the whole night sitting there. Soon we started a conversation to ward off boredom. He told us, he was in a forced labor camp. We were happy to meet a fellow Jew. We talked about lost homes, lost loved ones, the sufferings we went through. He told us he had a girlfriend once, if he will find her again, he will marry her. Then he started to sing a sad song.

"Oh, if I could go home again.

If I could embrace my mother.

See my Father.

See my lover.

Every minute now is as long as a year.

I call on your memory.

To help me in this hard life.

Oh, if I could go home again.'

These words can sound insignificant and not to clever to someone who didn't live

through what we did. This song brought out tears from our eyes. It was written by forced labor inmates who sang it in their misery.

We were taken out of this depressing mood when we observed a Russian soldier with an interpreter walking around the waiting room asking for identification and selecting young women only – for an unspecified work. They arrived to us, asked my papers. Then told me to join the group of already selected women. I looked at Gyuri with despair. He jumped up from the bench his face very pale. "I will go with my sister," he said. The interpreter made Gyuri to understand that he better not say anything, just sit down, and he walked away. But Gyuri didn't just sit down. He was talking. "You can't separate us. We have been together through hell. We are Jews. We are going home."

The interpreter said something to a Russian soldier and he nodded, "Okay, you can stay with your brother."

We held hands, as we sat. There was no question to say thank you, we didn't need it, we knew that we are ready to do for each other whatever is required. We find this totally natural.

Soon people came with the news that a train will leave the station soon. The train again was cattle cars and the doors were locked on them. How can we board such a train? Finally we found a small bench between two wagons. We sat down very close to each other. It was almost noon now, so we took out the dry bread and ate. On every possible and impossible nook and cranny people were sitting, standing, hanging on this train. We waited. But there was no indication of the train leaving. It was very cold, It was noon now. Lajos, our new friend, the one who sang that song to us in the waiting room came to us with the news that the Russians, in their military train on the next track are cooking bean soup, and anybody who ask will get some. We didn't want to leave our good spot on the train so I went and got soup. I thought that I have never tasted better food in my life. Then Gyuri went and we talked about the bean soup the whole afternoon. Slowly it started to get dark. The cold was unbearable. We opened the comforter and put it around us. Gyuri kept saying, "Please, Agi, don't fall asleep, because then you will freeze." Slowly total darkness descended on the motionless train. I was afraid that when the train will move, we will fall asleep and so freeze. And still, with all my heart I wished for the train to move. Anything is better than sitting on this narrow bench like this. Suddenly in

the dark we saw a face. It was Lajos with the news that there is a heated train transporting Romanian soldiers. "I told the soldiers about you kids, being half frozen, they will let you in to warm up."

"Yes, yes, but if the train....."

"What, this train moving? Not a chance. This train won't move until morning."

We didn't bother to roll up the comforter, carried open, climbed through another train to get to the soldiers wagons, from where we heard voices and saw light in the windows. We entered timidly and found ourselves among lots of soldiers in festive mood. It was wonderfully warm inside. We sat down in a corner. I didn't want the soldiers to notice me but when I took off my kerchief, the soldiers became quieter and looked toward me. They asked me, speaking in German, to please come out of the corner, sit with them, they could use some female company. I went to them, smiled at them, tried to talk to them. We were taken out from this nice interlude by Lajos who – looking through the window- saw our train moving. We dashed out of the soldiers' train, couldn't even say goodbye to anyone. I was dragging the comforter after me as we ran to find our little bench. When we were seated there I noticed that the silk on the comforter was ripped again on a new place, and the down was coming out.

"Never mind! Main thing we are on the train. Look, Gyuri, this ugly Szolnok is already gone. We have to be careful not to fall asleep."

This sentence was said many times during the night, either by me or by my brother. As the train gained speed, the cold was cutting us like knives.

After two hours of traveling the train stopped on an open field. People got off asking each other, "why did we stop?" Again, Lajos had the information that the train on the adjacent track will leave soon. We went to this other train. That train had open wagons where we couldn't even sit down, because snow covered the floor. We climbed on because we couldn't see any other action we could take. It was night, around us the silent fields, all covered with deep snow. We jumped up and down to warm up a little. We couldn't imagine what will happen when the train will start to move. I thought for sure we will fall off the train.

Again Lajos to the rescue.

"Kids. I discovered one covered wagon with Russian soldiers occupying it. It is nice and

warm inside. I promised them to bring a young woman so they will let us stay there." I realized the danger for me in this situation, but by now I didn't care if I will be gang raped, just to be warm, me and my brother.

The first thing my brother did in the wagon was to take off his wet shoes and stockings and was warming his feet. I sat down in a corner. The soldiers were having their supper. They offered us some. I was waiting for something to happen, but the soldiers didn't display any threatening behavior at all. The train started to move, Beside me sat a handsome blond soldier who put his arm around my shoulder. The train stopped. Somebody was knocking on the door of the wagon. When the soldiers opened it, about ten Hungarian peasants were looking in on us, scared, when they saw the Russians and wanted to go away. But the Russians smiled and motioned for them to get on the train. They did and stood around in a dark corner in a tight knot away from the fire. They got off at the next station.

The Russian soldier was holding me in his arms during the night. We kissed. His hands did not wander. It was like a first date in high school. Innocent. We couldn't understand each other, but there was no need to talk. I never forgot him. His humanness, his tenderness, his gentle ways.

Dawn started t break. Lajos, who new everything there is to know, told us that we were very close to Miskolc.

In the morning the train stopped. Some soldiers got off to fetch water. The Russians washed in a funny way. They took water in their mouth, then spit it into their palms, washing their face with it laughingly urging me to try it. I did, but couldn't master it. I kept swallowing the water. A soldier started to play the accordion and the wagon was full with the melodies of beautiful Russian songs. We were in a good mood. We drank tea. Then the train started to move, and a half hour later we arrived in Miskolc.

We said good by to Lajos and to the soldiers – I gave a last kiss to my special soldier and got off the train. There we stood, on the platform, looked around and to our biggest surprise, felt nothing.

"Gyuri, we are home."

"Yes, Agi, we have arrived."

But both of us felt that we arrived nowhere. That this city, which threw us to the dogs is

not our home anymore, and can never be home again. We didn't verbalize our feelings, just looked at each other. We started walking out of the station, very quietly.

Surprisingly the electric tram was operating. We boarded one of the yellow cars and from the moment the tram started taking us through the well known, much loved streets I felt such an anguish as I never felt before. Here I am in the city where I was born and grew up. We passed the big square where the farmers' market used to be held, I went there when I was a little girl with my mother to shop for our dinner. I had a small basket on my arm, and my mother bought me some currants and a pretzel to put in it. The tram traveled through Main Street where we lived and which was the scene of all my childhood. Finally we saw the old yellow building. Our building. By then both of us tried very hard not to cry but couldn't keep the tears from flooding our eyes. The old staircase – "look, Gyuri – this is where we fell down once. Look here, your name is still on the wall where you wrote it." Then we reached the hallway. Nothing changed. We passed the familiar doors, this is where the landlord lived, this is where the doctor lived, here is the door of the tailor, here is the door of Ilus and here, here this brown door, with a padlock on it, this is where we lived. I started to cry loudly uncontrollably and Gyuri the sixteen year old man had the tears flowing, too. I went down to the super for the key. The anti-semitic always very malevolent woman looked in my eyes, red from crying, burning from anger, she gave me the key without a word.

When the door opened we entered an alien place. Thick dust covered everything. Some of our furniture was missing, the others were haphazardly stood here and there in the rooms. There is nothing worse than seeing your house destroyed like this.

We stood in the living room where in one corner we found a tin in which we used to keep sugar. It was empty now, but the lid had the imprint of my mother's fist. One morning we misbehaved by the table and my mother, I guess in frustration, hit the lid of that tin. I lifted it from the floor and carefully wiped the dust from it. My piano was there. In the bedroom I opened my mother's wardrobe. I could smell her perfume. It was totally empty the only thing that was there was a purple belt I recognized as my mother's. I looked at my brother's pale suffering face and said, "They will come back, mother and father. They will come back. Gyuri, please say something."

"Sure they will come back. They are not old, they will be back. Please, Agi, stop crying."

Slowly we quieted down. In the bathroom, we found some hair dryers and other beauty shop equipment. There were some furniture in the rooms that didn't belong to us, so we understood that people were occupying the apartment.

I somehow became energized. "Let's go to Ilus." She lived next door to us. She was once an intern in my father's tailor shop. My father taught her tailoring and after she was working for him a number of years, she opened her own shop. Gyuri didn't want to come with me, I guess he wanted some time alone in the house.

Ilus didn't recognize me. She knew me since I was five years old, she looked right into my face and she didn't know who I was. She asked me who I am looking for. She looked at my worn shoes, the faded kerchief, the man's trousers, with suspicion. I couldn't speak. And suddenly Ilus' face changed from suspicion to flabbergasted and bewildered.

"Agi, you are alive."

I thought – well, they thought us all dead. But I couldn't be angry at Ilus. She knew my mother. I put my head on her shoulder and cried bitter tears.

Later Gyuri came over and Ilus made coffee and gave us bread with jam.

Ilus kept asking me where I was, how I survived – with Gyuri – but we both felt that we have nothing to tell her.

"We survived in Budapest. It was hard.

"But now we are waiting for our parents."

We sat there awhile, then decided to clean our apartment. Ilus told us that a teacher lived in our place with his family, until they left with the retreating German army.

I didn't know where to begin the cleaning. I was very inexperienced in house work. But by the time Gyuri came back, who after finishing our lunch at Ilus went to "look around in the city" one room was put to order, best I could. I dusted two beds and pulled them to the window. Naturally, no sheets, no pillows or blankets. All we had was the yellow comforter which was in bad shape. Gyuri told me that there were stores open and that he went to a Elisabeth Kovacs who almost fainted when Gyuri entered. She was wearing my mother's dress on the table was our table cloth, on the wall hung our paintings.

"So it looks like she has most of our furnishings." I scarcely listened to him. I was thinking of how to obtain a blanket for him.

We were invited to dinner at Ilus. I decided to clean up and open the beauty shop, so we

will have money to live on.

Afternoon, we went to Elisabeth Kovacs. I cried again, when I saw her. She wasn't wearing my mother's dress now, but I saw the paintings and the table cloth. I also noticed hair dryers and other beauty shop equipment belonging to us. After a short while I told her, "Elisabeth, we have no money , we haven't got a change of underwear, not to talk about bed linen. Please give us back our things."

"Oh, Agi, everything was taken by the Russians. Only what you see is left."

"Everything? All those wonderful things, all my trousseau – you took it all."

"Yes, Agi. All was taken."

"Elisabeth, I don't believe you. You know because you saw how hard my mother worked to buy those things."

My voice became clear and commanding. I sat very straight on the chair as I looked at the woman who was now flushed in the face. "You now give me this lie."

"But dear Agi, the Russians really…."

"Enough. If you are so heartless, I don't care. Keep everything. And now I will take this table cloth, these paintings, give me my mother's dress you were wearing this afternoon, and give me my mother's fur coat. Don't even try to tell me that you don't have it. You were seen wearing it. Now, you see it is here."

I didn't want to appear weak again, but when I touched my mother's fur coat, I cried. But only for a moment. Then I looked into the eyes of this merciless woman and I was as hard as she.

"I will be back tomorrow for the beauty shop equipment with a car."

"Please, Agi, don't take those, I need them."

"I need them too. Look, Elisabeth, I understand that it is hard for you to give us back our things, because you considered those things yours. The pretense that we leave those things with you for safekeeping, it was on your part just this – pretense. Forgive me if I can't feel any sympathy for you. I will be back tomorrow for the things." And we left.

The street was busy. But somehow everything had changed. Even the air wasn't the same. The street was covered with dirty snow and slush. We look at the new face of our city with interest. It seems there was very little damage done to the city. Russian soldiers male and female were promenading on the streets. I caressed them with my eyes. My

liberators – to them I will forever be grateful I thought. We saw some familiar faces. But no Jews. I was the first Jewish woman returning. There were a few men back, forced labor camp inmates who now, without their wives and children just spent the time best they could. Everybody was waiting for the return of their families. We didn't yet know the full horror of what happened.

First night in our home. It was very cold in the apartment. We had a stove, tomorrow we will clean it, and we can have a fire.

Ilus gave us a light bulb, and we were sitting in this pale yellow light. Around us the big silent apartment. We were silent too. We were surrounded with shadows of the past. Tomorrow? Tomorrow we have to do many things. Tonight, we can sit by the table, not talking. I can play a few notes on my piano. We could open doors, looking for something. What? We could go through the silent rooms again and again.

Tomorrow will be a new day.

IX.

In the morning we had a pleasant surprise. A cousin of ours came to see us. He has been back a few weeks already. He saw that we had no pillows, he left and came back with two fat goose down filled pillows.

"Use it in good health. There is more where this came from. I am with the civil police. I take from those dirty Nazis, the things the poor Jews left with them, or they took from them. Boy kids, if you could see how these not so long ago big shots are afraid of me."

This was true. The Hungarian Nazis were afraid of the retaliation of the Jews, which their guilty conscience expected as perhaps just punishment. But Jews are not blood thirsty. There was no retaliation, as I know of.

I got the beauty shop equipment from Elisabeth which didn't go smoothly. The apartment started to look organized. I wanted everything to look as it did before. I ordered a big sign on which was written in Hungarian and Russian. "Beauty Shop."

"I will open the shop tomorrow."

I was glad. But first I wanted to oil and clean all the hair dryers, so I put on my mother's fur coat and went to an electrician. There was a handsome man about twenty-two there, and promised me to send someone in the afternoon. I was surprised when he himself showed up. It was very cold in the room and I was sitting in the fur coat. He was very

handy and soon he finished with the work. We started talking, and before I knew it, I was telling him all I lived through. The coat slipped off my shoulders. And I talked and almost lived again that dangerous game. I played to save my life. He was chain smoking and listening to me very attentively. Suddenly he took me in his arms and kissed me. I was astonished, and asked him to leave. He looked at me with his big blue eyes and said, "Okay, I leave. But I will be back," and he was gone.

The next morning I made a fire in the beauty shop stove, put on my white uniform and waited for customers. They came. Russians, Hungarians. I worked happily. That evening we ate in a restaurant. Gyuri spent his days with drawing, walking around the city, making new friends. I let him. After all he is still a child – I thought.

Evenings my cousin came to see us, with his friends. Sometimes I played the piano for them. One night my cousin said that he will bring a man who want to be introduced to me. It was the electrician who kissed me. We both felt awkward, but couldn't show it, because my cousin thought that we met for the first time. After that, Laci, the electrician, came over to see me every night. I find a good friend in him, all I had to be careful of is not to be alone with him.

The days passed. The shop was busy. But life was still hard. Many times we went to bed hungry, in an ice cold room. Sometimes I thought, is it possible that these cold unfriendly rooms were once a warm soft nest? A home? Where one could day dream in a corner, looking at my mother knitting. Everything was different. Sometimes I couldn't imagine my mother in these rooms again, making this place home again. I couldn't imagine my mother perhaps pale and skinny entering the apartment , but still I tried to play the scene, when she will come in, and I will run into her arms, with a new all encompassing love. Laci saw this intense waiting, saw the poverty we lived in, and because he really loved me, he suffered with me. He was half Jewish and survived the Nazi era right here in Miskolc, with his parents. Nobody bothered them. I guess they were known as gentiles.

"Agi, I want to help you, let me bring you some wood for the fire. Agi, I want to marry you. divorce your husband when he comes home and marry me. I will be the happiest man alive."

"No, I will not divorce my husband. I love him. What would my mother think, if I divorced him?"

But Laci never lost his passion. He loved me with so much passion. But I couldn't be warmed up. My heart was frozen.

The weeks passed. I was now used to the idea of being the boss of the beauty shop. I took a helper.

One day my cousin came with the news that he can sell my accordion to a Russian commandant. He offered things that in 1945 winter were priceless treasures, two wagons of coal, two fat geese. And a loaf of bread every morning from the Russian army kitchen for two weeks. I couldn't resist it. Okay.

Next day the Russian major came for the accordion. I handed over to him with aching heart. I felt as if I am parting with an old friend, I did love so. In Budapest I was thinking of it like one thinks of a much loved pet. Why is it that all beauty and all happiness keep disappearing from life? This kind of life is been going on so long now. I felt I lost the capacity for happiness. I was wondering how long this grayness will last. I wanted to come home so badly. Now I was home. The same walls had surrounded me and I suffered.

On the streets the returning camp survivors were more numerous now. Some were still wearing their stripped prisoner uniforms, others wore raggedy civilian clothes. Some were frightfully thin with shrunken heads, their hair shaven and had maybe an inch growth of hair. Others were normal weight and had all their hair. But in one aspect of their appearance they resembled each other. Their eyes spoke of unimaginable sufferings. I saw some women who came back and were my mother's age. It renewed my hope of her return. I went to see my grandmother's home. The always gay welcoming apartment was dirty, disarranged papers and pictures strewn all around. I collected them. I looked around in this wilderness, and searched for the loved faces. My grandmother with her white hair, my always laughing young aunts, but the deserted walls looked at me blankly. Nobody was there. This is what they did.

I went to the movies to forget. When I was sitting in the dark in one of the three movies the city had, nothing had changed in those theatres. I could imagine that maybe I will go home and instead of silence, I will find my mother sitting by the fire. Then came the newsreel. Human skeletons, mountains of dead people, the crematorium. I couldn't sit there watching this. Those are my people I thought. I wanted to jump up, tear at my hair,

cry out loud, but I didn't. I just ran out of the theatre just as the American burlesque film started.

In the beauty shop my mother's old customers asked – "where is your mother?" And when I answered them, with a smile on my face, saying something like, "I don't know," I felt a deep cold hatred in my heart.

Evenings, when I was alone in the house. I lay down on my bed and gave vent to my terrible sorrow, crying, crying. I was now afraid maybe my mother was killed also. The newsreels, the stories told by the homecoming inmates made it clear to me what happened. After awhile, I didn't want to talk to the survivors anymore. I felt I can't take it, the naturalness with which these women spoke of the unimaginable horrors they went through. "My mother went through all this, what should I do for her that she should be able to forget?, I thought. When I became a teenager my mother and I didn't get along sometime. I thought, it will be different now. I will wash her feet, feed her, - oh just come home, Mama.

Lately my brother took to go to the railroad station to wait for our parents. He went every night. "Imagine, Agi, what a happy surprise it will be for them if they will see me waiting for them there." No matter what the weather was he never missed a night. But he always came home alone. In his sad eyes hope was extinguished, to come back to it again, the next evening.

We got used to being on our own. I was proud of the beauty shop I resurrected and couldn't wait for my mother to see it.

Then a new fear gripped the people in the city. There were a lot of typhoid fever cases. The louse is spreading it, told me a customer who was a nurse. The louse that was brought in the city by the returning concentration camp inmates. She told me that if I will see a louse on a garment, I will have to iron the garment on which the louse was found. I thought, no way will we have lice. We washed every day. The same day

Gyuri found a louse in his sweater. I was hysterical. I thought shortly we will be ill with typhoid fever. I threw the sweater in the stove which created a terrible smell and smoke in the room. After this I ironed every piece of garment with hot iron, I even ironed the upholstery on the sofa and chairs, even the rug. We ironed until midnight. We were dead

tired when we finally got to bed. Then I heard Gyuri saying, "Now I have lost my sweater."

X

It was spring. Nature is not influenced by what happens to people. The spring of 1945 was just as glorious as every spring is. I was walking around with Laci, all over town, streets where behind the fences were flowering fruit trees. The parks were full of beautiful flowers.

Gyuri still kept up his vigilance on the railroad station. I was impressed by his constancy. Me – I lived in a daze. I didn't know if I can or should still hope for the return of my family. But I had to hope!

That night, Gyuri was at the station, Laci and my cousin were with me in the living room. Laci brought a record player with lots of records and we listened to the songs. In the middle of the table a big bouquet of yellow tulips. Then the doorbell rang. I opened the door. A small skinny old man stood there before me. "Who are you looking for?" I asked. He didn't answer , just stood there looking at me. A minute later I thought, "his eyes" and cried out, "Father" and I was pulling in the now crying old man. We embraced and cried bitter tears there in the hall, where we heard a record playing a sentimental love song. As I held him, I thought, "what did they do to him, what could they have done to him, and while my hair was wet from my father's tears, I saw my father as he looked when I left him a year ago. Black hair, red cheeks, always joking, laughing. Now I look at a very old man. Then I took his hand, lead him into the living room where the music played, where the yellow tulips were. I sat him down by the table. Somebody shut the record player up. Suddenly it was very quiet in the room.

"This is my father, boys. Please leave us now. Tomorrow …you come back tomorrow." The two men walked slowly, quietly to the door. Suddenly my cousin turned back and asked, "Uncle Andor, how about my father. And my brother. I know you were with them. Will they be home soon?"

My father looked at my cousin with expressionless eyes and in a dry monotonous voice he said, "Your father is dead. Your brother will be back," My cousin stood there like someone who was hit on the head, then slowly he walked out. We could hear him crying from the hall, then the front door opened and closed and I was alone with my Father. He smiled at me. It was a terrible smile on that ravaged face on which a smile was not

present now for a long time. The he said, "my little girl." I who didn't hear this for so long just fell down on my knees put my head on his knees. We stayed like this for a short time, then I washed him, combed his hair, fed him, - the father who came back from the dead.

The doorbell was ringing. Gyuri came home. I was smiling as I asked – "nobody?". He made a gesture of hopelessness and said, "Nobody."

"Gyuri come in the living room. Don't be too shocked but…" I couldn't say anymore because Gyuri as if he would have guessed what I was going to say ran into the living room. After they cried in each other's arms, Gyuri realized that he saw this old man in the station, but he didn't recognize him as his Father.

As we later found out our Father was making his way from Kophaza, where he was liberated, to Miskolc in a feverish daze. A few days before liberation, he came down with typhoid fever and was lying on dirty straw in a barn, with several of his comrades, with high fever, unconscious. When the Russians came in, he still had a fever, but was conscious. He started homeward weak and sick as he was. Now he lay in bed, his two children on his bedside. His eyes asked a question which his lips didn't dare to form, "where is Mother?"

Next morning he couldn't get out of bed. All the way home his very weak body obeyed to the will - home, home. Now that he was home, the body gave out. On his feet the frostbite became infected, oozing gangrene. His hands were constantly shaking. His eyes followed my every move.

"Father, when you will be stronger, you can go to the public bath. You always liked to go there." He sat up in bed with fear in his eyes.

"No, I can't go there. Jews are not allowed in the public baths."

I had to explain to him that we are now free. He obviously didn't believe me, shaking his head. He was not totally rational.

I thought – what did they do to my proud, clever, always laughing Father? Will he be his old self ever again?

And then from one day to another, he got his total mental capacity back. Slowly he started to gain weight, so by the beginning of the summer he was like I remembered him

to be. He even got his belly big again, and he learned to laugh again. He opened his tailor shop. We tried to live a life.

I went out a lot with Laci, to the cinema, to the theatre. Who ever saw me then, would have thought me a happy young girl. But this wasn't so. I woke up many nights at the sound of my own crying, which then could go on for hours.

That Sunday was especially luminous. Summer just started, the air was fragrant and fresh. I got dressed in my best outfit and went to see a girl – a distant cousin , who had returned from the camps a short time ago. I was hoping to get some information about my mother. Maybe she can tell me if my mother is on her way back already?! I was walking on this sparkling Sunday afternoon, singing a song softly to myself.

The girl opened the door for me. When I saw her pale, shrunken, face I got very quiet. Inside and out.

The big windows in the room where we entered were open, and the yellow sun covered everything. By the table sat a woman, giving herself a manicure.

She introduced her to me this way, "my camp mate." Then she sat down the couch, picked up the stocking she was mending. She didn't look at me. "Come, Agi, sit by me, I want to talk to you." But as I sat beside her, she was silent. I started to feel something terrible, an ice cold grip on my heart. I saw, she can't or won't speak – so I asked her,

"Did you…did you see my Mother?"

"Yes, Agi, I did. She was wearing a black dress and a black kerchief on her head. She was with your grandfather."

"Yes, she was wearing black because she was mourning her mother and ?…"

"Well, yes, Agi, she was sent to the left side – to the crematorium."

"To the left?"

All went dark in front of my eyes, but I didn't lose consciousness. I wasn't given the oblivion of fainting, no, I was wide awake.

I sat there, deadly pale, with a knife in my heart that was pushed in there just now. This knife will stay in my heart for the rest of my life. I was nineteen.

The two women looked at me with concern. I must have looked like a ghost. One of them brought me a glass of water. I drank it.

They killed ~~my beautiful~~ two year old ~~daughter and burned her~~ in the ~~crematorium~~. I had

11

to calm down in order to live. You will have to do the same. We can't change anything. It's all done," said the woman with the manicure. I didn't answer, I didn't say goodbye to them, I just walked out slowly. The sun was still high on the sky, people were walking on the street, laughing, children were playing.

I wanted darkness and quiet. I walked on faster and faster. People greeted me, but I didn't answer them. I had not shed tears yet. My eyes were dry.

"They killed her! She got off the wagon, tired, that all black outfit. Maybe if I had been with her.... They gave her a towel and a soap. I bet she was happy thinking she was to take a shower after the long voyage. Then they opened the shower on them, but instead of water, deadly mustard gas came from the showerheads. She must have been surprised. She got suffocated. She maybe thought of me the last minute. I can never see her again. No, this can't be so. I will look for her. But where? She is no more. She is not on this planet. They put her on a shovel, a big shovel and threw her in the crematorium. They burned my mother." And here finally I started to cry. I was in a park now. I don't know how and why I got there. I sat on the grass, it was quiet there and it started to get dark. There I cried a long time. "I can't do anything. It's over. It's over." I wanted, wished to die. Suddenly it was dark, and I felt chilly. I became aware of my surroundings. I saw the silent landscape, the bushes which witnessed my anguish and hid me from the world. "Why didn't I die here?" It seems that it is not enough to wish to die. I called death, but it didn't appear. I walked slowly out of the park. I knew I will have to live. I wanted to live. But didn't know how, I felt I lost my faith, hope and all that is necessary to live. I felt dead inside. I sensed then that I was changed to a person I didn't know yet. I looked at everything differently. The world, people, and me in it.

At home Gyuri and my father were sitting by the table. My father looked at me questioningly.

"Mother will not come back."

They started to cry. I looked at them now with dry eyes. I thought I cried all my tears. How wrong I was. I had plenty tears for every day of my remaining life. My face I felt had changed that day. My eyes were changed. I hated the people who killed my mother. I hated them, because I had nothing left but this hatred. I learned to laugh again, but never fully. After this all my waking life, and sometimes my dreams were tainted with the

knowledge of that horrible crime.

I could end my story here. Because my story did end there. But I was nineteen and there were lots of life to live yet.

My husband came back from Mauthausen, where he was liberated by the Americans. He was so skinny, so weak, that if the Americans would have come just one day later, he would have been dead. We moved to Budapest where we struggled to survive in the ravaged city. Then we left Hungary, smuggled into Austria, where we joined the displaced persons. We ended up in Bavaria, near Munich, in a huge DP camp. Lots of things happened there to us, but I recall one incident here only. The Americans gave us our food and anything else we needed. One day they distributed soaps. They gave us these small grey soaps which had written on it "R.J.F." The Jews who were survivors of the camps threw it away with horror. "You know what these letters mean? "Rein Jude Felt." This soap is made out of the bodies of our parents, our siblings, our children. The Americans made a terrible mistake. But obviously they weren't aware of it. I took the soap I was given, and buried it behind the barracks. My son was born there, in the camp's hospital. We ended up in Israel where I am writing this memoir, in a small village by the Lebanese border.

My brother lives in Paris, France. He is a painter. We don't see each other a lot, but we often write. We never write about sad things. We differ in the way we handle our past. I want to talk about what happened to us, to inform people, and I hate the world for doing this to us. My brother never talks of his pain. It hurt him as much as it hurts me, but he is smiling. He hates nobody.

EPILOGUE 1

Independence day in Israel 1952. Tel Aviv. On the streets big crowds. People walking the streets with sparkling eyes, happy faces. We are celebrating.

I am among them. I let the crowd take me. Around me good looking people, dressed festively, talking loudly, happily mostly in Hebrew, but you could hear the languages of the entire world around you. Young girls and boys, holding on to each other pushing themselves through the crowds. Then I hear music. A military march. Suddenly I see the soldiers. These are our boys. I am applauding, yelling, laughing, smiling, waving to the

boys, marching there in their handsome uniforms.

All those that died the deaths of martyrs are with us. For their death, the world gave us Israel. I feel if anything, this can heal some of the pain, at least enough of it so I can live. And I feel something now, a feeling that was denied to me for so long now. The love for my country and my people.

EPILOGUE II

I wrote this memoir in 1952 when I was twenty seven. I don't remember writing it, and I completely forgot about its existence.

My brother had found the manuscript when he went through my father's papers after he died in the early 70's. The manuscript was in my father's handwriting. My brother put it away with other papers, old pictures, etc. and didn't look at it until twenty years later. First he thought my father wrote it, but after reading it, he realized only I could have written it. My father carefully copied my manuscript, which must have been written in several notebooks, or maybe was disintegrating – I don't know. My father never mentioned this memoir to me. My brother mailed it to me.

I was very moved, holding the two old notebooks with my father's handwriting. He even carefully numbered the pages.

I started reading it, a few times, but found it too upsetting. I had put the manuscript away and didn't pick it up again.

One day I got a letter from the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. writing that a representative will be in Manhattan, and if I have some holocaust related material, pictures, documents that I wish to donate to the museum, I can bring it.

The representative stayed two days in New York. I went on the first day and gave some Pictures and documents. The day after, in the morning, I remembered the manuscript.

I thought that the museum would be a splendid place for it. I went back, and left the manuscript there. I felt good, somewhat lighter when I left.

The next morning I woke up and felt the loss of the manuscript. All of a sudden I wanted to read it, all of it. But my apartment no longer contained the grey notebooks.

Two weeks later I called the museum and asked for a copy.

After I got it, read some of it, I decided to translate it into English. I worked on it for a

week every day for a half hour or so, after which I started to cry and feel sad. I thought, why am I doing this to myself? This is torture. So I stopped.

I told about this to my son, who said that I must continue, that I owe it to them to tell this story, and that he was eager to read it.

I went back to it, and now is done. I was careful not to change the language, the expressions of a twenty seven year old to my present language and expressions

I don't know how successful I was in that.

I am now seventy three. My prediction which I made when I was nineteen proved to be true. The pain and suffering that started then, is still with me.

For years it was foremost for my mother that I grieved. Then I started to grieve with just as much intensity for all who perished in the Holocaust. You say one can't grieve for six million people?! Yes one can. I have and I am.

I believe now that "they" didn't do it to us. They did it to their brothers and sisters. I used to feel that "they" belonged to an alien race, but now I know that "they" are and was made of the same stuff as I am made of. Now I hate no more. At some point of time not too long ago I rejoined the human family and no one can ever tell me again that I don't belong. My feelings for people who are racist or anti-semitic is – I feel sorry for them. They are wasting their only life with such stupidity.

I don't want to give the impression that my life was a sad life. Far from it.

I enjoyed my life. I had an adventurous life. I lived boldly.

Yes, the grief and sorrow underlined everything, but still, I had lots of fun in life. I've made sure of that. I tried never to show the side of me that was sad, but of course, sometimes I did.

I missed my mother all my life, and I missed the family I lost. My grandfather, the aunts, uncles, cousins.

I missed the friends I lost. My schoolmates all forty five of them who perished.

But I lived in this beautiful world, loving, learning, changing, adapting. I am grateful for my life every day.

My brother who is now seventy had a wonderful life. He has a daughter who wears my mother's face.

Miracles never cease.